Finding Room in Beirut



Places of the Everyday

Carole Lévesque

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Content





garden on Tyan street

Before we make room

I arrived in Lebanon to begin an appointment at the Department of Architecture of the American University of Beirut in the summer of 2009. Though the civil war had ended more than a decade before, and no major political unrest had disturbed the city for nearly two years, traces of the suffering the city had had to endure still showed everywhere: squatted buildings along the airport road studded with ads for diamond watches and beautifully perfect people, bullet holes every which way next to brand new residential towers, boarded-up doors and windows, roofs long gone, accompanied by the sound of nearby A/C units and generators. On the streets: overflowing garbage bins. audacious drivers, entire families on a single scooter, and countless obstacles dispersed along the sidewalks, when sidewalks there were. I soon started to walk the city extensively, getting lost as often as possible. On one of my excursions, as I was looking to escape from the traffic of Bechara El Khoury road, I fell upon Bachoura: tumbled-down buildings, a new construction site, abandoned lots, overgrown wilderness, and a man hosing down a mass of burning paper in the concrete room adjacent his small print shop, nonchalantly smoking a cigarette. It was as quiet as can be, the sky was a perfect blue, birds were singing. A very peculiar place, I thought.

While my interest in temporary architecture seemed most appropriate to my new adoptive country, seeing the countless abandoned places as opportunities for appropriations, it took some time to think I had the right to an opinion on how things were, let alone to intervene in them or write about them. As I was clearly interested in discovering more abandoned places, more crowded neighborhoods, more contrasting realities, other cities, villages in the mountains, ruins, I witnessed the rapid development of the country. In Hamra alone, the neighborhood adjacent to the university campus, buildings were going up and down at an incredible pace: new shops opening every week; others, almost as new, shutting down. The Solidere area downtown was yet another piece of the city where fierce speculation was apparent, at a much greater scale, with towers going up and ever more terrain prepared for even more soon-to-come towers. The turnover of the city, in its built form as much as in its practice, was, and is, in a constant state of renewal.

I returned to Bachoura sometime in January, thinking that it would be a good place to take our studio in the next semester. Along with my colleague Hala Younes, I walked the small streets exhaustively, looking at and into buildings, climbing on roofs, talking to the locals I have come to call *Bachourians*, gauging the situation. My knowledge of the local political affiliation (once a mixed neighborhood, Bachoura had become an almost exclusively Shiite community after the war and was thought to be the urban seat of the Hezbollah, though governed by the political group Amal) was still somewhat minimal; it had not crossed my mind that AUB students might

not be the most welcome in the area. Hala, a wonderful Lebanese-born woman, knew, of course, the situation we were putting ourselves into, but went along with my enthusiasm. The work with the students turned out to be an accelerated class on political and religious differences, unspoken barriers, and struggles related to the informal occupations of the neighborhood.

While the studio ended in May, I continued to visit Bachoura on a regular basis through the summer, taking photographs, mapping and systematically documenting the state of the neighborhood. Slowly the idea of the project presented in this book developed. Bachoura became the testing ground for both the urban reflections and the personal infrastructures project.

After a summer vacation to Montreal in 2011, I came back to Bachoura to find that within two months one of the construction sites, which had only gotten underway in the spring, was now up to ten stories; another tower, started when I first encountered the neighborhood, was now into the finishing stage; a large building on the market street had been taken down; a parking lot was being excavated; an abandoned lot that gave an incredible view over the highway and the new downtown mosque was walled in with a tall concrete fence; a long-abandoned construction site was now covered with scaffolding. It was time I started writing and drawing, before all would be gone.

While I started working on this project, I also initiated a drawing experiment at the Ras El Nabeh public school, located on Tyan Street at the heart of Bachoura. Getting approval from the Ministry of Education to lead this project with the children of the forth-, fifth- and sixth-grade classes is a story of its own, one Franz Kafka would have been proud of. Without getting into the details, as there are many, this approval meant that I could join in the art



Aya Hariri and Hadi Mansouf, Ras El Nabeh School, 2011

felt pen on card stock 18 x 24 cm

classes, once a week for each class, and work with the children on drawing their neighborhood. The intention behind this initiative, beyond spending more time in Bachoura and simply enjoying drawing with the children, was to discover other perceptions of the neighborhood, and to make of it a laboratory, to test the potential of drawing as a narrative tool. The children produced some 75 drawings over the course of seven weeks. On the eighth week, we wanted to present the work in a public exhibition. But visitors are not allowed in the school without permission from the Ministry of Education, and the children cannot leave the school grounds during class hours. We found ourselves in a difficult position, as I wanted the children to take part in setting up the exhibition. So we encased each drawing in a plastic pocket, mounted them all on long ribbons to which we attached bags of *foul* (dried beans), and literally defenestrated the drawings. The children thus displayed their work in a public exhibition, in their neighborhood, from their second-floor class windows.

This exhibition, which was presented for only two hours—I should perhaps speak of it more in terms of a performance than anything else—attracted a small crowd of locals and convinced the school's principal to let the children go out on the street so they could see their displayed work. Though the initial steps of the project had seemed unusual to the children and suspicious to the principal, it proved to be a worthy documentation of the neighborhood.

Unfortunately, giving sense and value to such areas as Bachoura isn't on everyone's agenda. When I left Beirut in the summer of 2012, evictions were taking place and plans for luxurious towers on the highway front were on the drafting table. I visited Lebanon again in 2014, and, though Bachoura was still standing and displayed most of its character, buildings were missing here and there, few construction sites were growing, and three buildings had been completed on the northeastern corner. Pretty in their purplish colors and large expanses of glass, these buildings now frame a "public" park, of all things, with grass, benches, even garbage and recycling bins for paper and metal. Over my continued visits in the following years, Bachoura was transformed a little more each time: the northen tier has become what is known as the Beirut Digital District, while the southern two-tier is incrementally demolished and paved over for towers to be built and, otherwise, overwhelmed with the influx of Syrian refugees.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, special thanks go to the students I have encountered at AUB. Their curiosity and desire to teach me how things work in Lebanon and how they consider foreigners coming to their country always made for interesting conversations. Of these students, a very special thank you to Dany Arakji who helped me document the state of Bachoura in the summer of 2010, Ahmad Yehya who came with me to the Ras El Nabeh school, Rani Kamel who helped with the spontaneous exhibition, Roula Gholmieh and my friend John Halaka, who documented the event.

The Ras El Nabeh experience was truly wonderful. I must thank the children of the fourth-, fifth- and sixth-grade classes, who all tried their utmost to understand what I was asking of them and to draw their best drawing each time we met. To Mr. Roy, their art teacher, who assented to the project, Mrs. Kassas, the school principal, who was always so welcoming, and all the other teachers and *surveillants* who were always there to greet me and offer coffee: thank you.

I met Odette Khalifeh through a friend of a friend, as is a common way of meeting people in Lebanon, at a café on Sassine Square in Ashrafiyeh. Odette is the wife of the late Lebanese painter Jean Khalifeh. She carries with her the sensitivity of an art lover and personifies brilliantly the Beirut I only know through stories and old pictures, speaking a perfect French at the wheel of her old Buick. I showed her the five texts from which the rooms project started. She read them slowly while sipping an Arabic coffee, explained how she would translate the texts, and accepted my offer. A few versions of the translation passed, and we met again at Sassine to review the final corrections. When our coffees were done, she asked: "Carole, do you know why I accepted and enjoyed working with your texts? I tell you why," she said. "I enjoyed them because I could tell, from reading your words, the love you have for our country."
Thank you so much, Odette. *Your* words will stay with me.

Thank you to Hala Younes, a dear friend and colleague

who taught with me the first *Welcoming City Design Studio* and made room for me in her office so that I could begin to write and draw this project in the fall of 2011.

I wish to thank my colleagues at AUB, who were so welcoming and supportive in my initiatives, and Robert Saliba, for reviewing the manuscript.

Finally, but most importantly, my thoughts go to Todd, Lily, and Pearl. Todd, you do everything for me. I hope this experience will remain with my daughters for many years to come and that they will keep up with the Arabic language so that one day we will be able, finally, to take them to the bank with us.

café on Nassif Al-Yazigi Street




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منطقة ٢٥
البسطة التحتا
RUE 58
شارع ٥٨
TOYOTA

Room for Robin

There was once a time in England when the king had to leave for a long voyage. While he had no close kin and had to be away with his army and counselors, his servile cousin was left to oversee the kingdom until his return. His cousin was selfish, greedy, and very jealous of the king for being so courageous and loved by his people. The prince seized this turn of events as the opportunity he had long awaited to take revenge upon the king. Since he couldn't directly confront him, his revenge would have to be taken through the exploitation of the defenseless people who revered the king so. His scheme was simple enough: demand that taxes be paid on everything. And if all had been taxed already, demand that a second, higher tax be paid, until all were left with nothing. Life became terribly harsh: no food was left, trade came to an end, and people lived in fear of the prince and his followers, who would inevitably come to arrest and jail all those who could no longer afford to pay their debts.

There lived in the forest a young man, smart as a fox, who could not bear to see the land of the king ruled by this prince, to see the people hungry, sad, and helpless. So he put his cleverness at their service: he played a hundred tricks on the prince to take the money the prince had stolen and to give back to the people. This drove the prince mad, and he gradually became obsessed with his inability to catch the clever thief. The prince, who had been seeking revenge upon the king, was being mocked by this unexpected little fox.

While the story of Robin Hood is really a fable of power, greed, wisdom, courage, and a lesson that good spirits will prevail, it is also a representation of the daily life of the commoner transformed through unforeseen actions. It is a lesson that everyday life comprises both difficulties and the means to change them. In the Disney rendition of Robin Hood of 1973, where Robin is indeed a fox, the opening scene captures exactly the dialectic of the everyday. While the low and steady voice of a rooster introduces the premise of the story to the sound of a lute, a book opens with drawings of the various characters we will soon see in action: parading joyfully, they are soon chased by the royal guards, arrows flying toward them, axes, even, being swung down on them.

The camera zooms into the storybook and the animation begins: "Robin Hood and Little John were walking through the forest..." when they hear the footsteps of the rhinoceros soldiers carrying Prince John's carriage and a large treasure chest. In no time, Robin Hood and Little John, dressed as colorful fortune tellers, lure Prince John into having his fortune told by Robin while Little John seduces the rhinoceroses, drills a hole under the treasure chest, unnoticed, and takes all the gold coins away with him, down in his dress. Robin Hood and Little John flee to the forest when Prince John realizes that all his gold is gone and erupts from his carriage screaming: "I've been robbed! Thieves!" But it is too late. The deed is done; the trick is played.

If this episode is quite humorous, it is interesting to think of it as a double-sided reality, a dialectic between the imposed order and the free event, between the city of the conqueror and the city of the dweller. It is also helpful to think of this tale to quickly put an image on and understand the powers at play in the contemporary city and the room that is still available for action. While our cities are quickly being developed under the spears of neoliberal forces and massive real-estate speculation, while it too often appears as if no alternative is feasible, the following pages will try to demonstrate. if not how, at least why, it is worth our while to look at the city as a field of open possibilities and action.

In his famous essay *The hedgehog and the fox*, Isaiah Berlin examines Tolstoy's vision of history. Berlin rests his argument—that Tolstoy was a fox who thought himself to be a hedgehog—on a brief line borrowed from the Greek poet Archilocus, which says that "the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing."[1] Berlin argues that this analogy relates to the two overarching visions of history: the hedgehog "relates everything to a single central vision, one system," while the fox "pursue[s] many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory[,]… related to no moral or aesthetic principle."[2] While it is not my intent to discuss at length Tolstoy's literature and view of history, it is tempting to borrow Berlin's analogy to explore the dialectic of the city. In his essay, Berlin relates the hedgehog to monism, where a single or narrow set of values override all others, while the fox relates to pluralism, as his view of the world embraces multiple points of view, even at the risk of them being conflicting or simply anthetical. In Berlin's assessment, Tolstoy was a fox: "he saw the manifold objects and situations on earth in their full multiplicity."[3] But while Tolstoy avoided the use of generic descriptions in favor of the particular, capturing the most precise uniqueness of the moment, he also believed in the possibility of one embracing vision in which everything would be directly related. Tolstoy in fact brilliantly impersonated the dichotomy between the hedgehog and the fox, being both at the same time: desiring a unifying vision, yet seeing the multiplicity of events occurring independently of each other in unique ways. It also reveals, as the progress of Berlin's argument makes it clear, that a conclusive categorization of Tolstoy is nearly impossible, that the initial seemingly obvious classification is itself, in the end, more difficult to achieve than one might have thought.

With *Two concepts of liberty*, which Berlin writes in 1958, one could think of the hedgehog as the zoomorphic representation of positive liberty, which places restrictions on individual freedom so as to achieve a common good for everyone, everywhere, at all times. Meanwhile the fox represents negative liberty, in which individuals are allowed to pursue their own vision of the good. The idea of both positive and negative liberty comes from the desire of the individual to be as he intends to be: "I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, acting being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by reference to my own ideas and purposes."[4] What divides the two liberties is that the positive one sees a dual nature within the individual: the real self, which is identified with reason, and the empirical self, which needs to be disciplined or even repressed if one ever wants to realize the potential of the real self.

1. Berlin, Isaiah.1953/1997. "The Hedgehog and the Fox." In *The Proper Study of Mankind, an Anthology of Essays*. 436–498. New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 436.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 463.

4. Berlin, Isaiah. 1958/1997. "Two concepts of Liberty." In *The Proper Study of Mankind, an Anthology of Essays*, 191–242. New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 203.

The danger sitting between the two selves is that the real self is too often understood as greater than the whole of the individual itself, and it becomes accepted, or even desired, to coerce other individuals for their own greater good. Berlin argues that the privileging of the real self can and has led positive liberty to go so far as to justify coercive actions by claiming that groups of individuals may not know of their real selves and that it is only their inability to repress their empirical selves that brings them to resist the greater good. It leads, more often than not, to a situation in which the positive means and ends supersede those of others. There has to remain, of course, a certain degree of negative liberty, an area, as little as it may be, within which individual choices are possible. But there is a greater area within which choices have already been made and imposed. Positive liberty is thus the hedgehog in that it finds a true solution, applicable to all and followed by all.

When looking at the city, the hedgehog and its positive liberty are both easily identifiable. Cities in the developing world, in countries with steady demographic growth or exponential wealth, have been the locus of financial expansion, of drastic urban strategies and "sustainable" innovation for the greater advancement of urbanity. While some might appear as clever and promising solutions, as if the real selves of the cities were finally coming to light, they leave, in fact, very little room for negative inhabitation. The grand master plans, development strategies, marketing and branding campaigns, economic growth, tourism, and corporations all require that the city be thought of as one all-encompassing blanket under which spaces are organized, placed, and synchronized, assuring the greater good of urban coherence. While the city planner, the urban designer, the engineer, and the architect are hard at work to satisfy both their thirst for eloquent ideas and their desire to act upon the city's fabric, it is generally agreed upon that an overall vision and intervention will serve a common goal toward the greater benefit of the city. If we are too close to current developments to see our hedgehog rolling around, we only have to think of the modernist dogma of the post-war years (with either the large housing projects built under the yoke of communism in Eastern Europe or those in any large American city, as critiqued by Jane Jacobs) to acknowledge the negative impacts of an overall vision applied at a great scale. One cannot, of course, be against the desire for beautiful and comfortable cities; one cannot, of course, be against the desire for a well-functioning city. But it is under these presumptions, along with massive capital and political gain, that cities are turned over, cleared of undesirables—be they of stone or flesh—and rebuilt to eventually attain the grand goal assigned to the process: to create a perfected image of the perfected city. Manicured to the tips of its sidewalks, the perfect city is one where surprises are kept to a minimum, where any form of illegality is controlled or incrementally pushed out to the boundaries, and where technologically advanced, environmentally friendly, or branded architectural landmarks rearrange the image of the city—an image quite different from that of Lynch.

While we are well aware that political monism can be dangerous when pursued to its extreme, urban monism doesn't appear quite as threatening, mostly because its extreme would lead to utopian visions and thus to non-places: the end of urban monism is in fact impossible. Cities can't literally tell people what to do and not to do; cities do not directly forbid or impose. But cities can be the means to a monism's end; they can be developed in such a way as to act on behalf of the greater good, be it political, social, or financial. Orchestrated urban development becomes both the shield and the spear that safeguards the acquired stability and pushes further the

growth of the “real” ideal. So the city may, in that respect, know one great thing: it knows how to gain and retain terrain, just like the hedgehog also knows one great thing: it knows to curl up to protect itself against the danger of the enemy. While curling up, the hedgehog also projects its sharp spikes toward the outside and brings to a halt any form of undesired intrusion. But it does something perhaps even more powerful, which it shares with current neoliberal urban growth: while it will indeed stop short the attack, it first seeks—and most likely succeeds—to discourage the very idea of a potential attack, before the soon-to-become attacker has even had the chance to conceive of the possibility of an attack. If the hedgehog succeeds at dismantling the very idea of the attack, then it not only stays safe but also builds a growing belief that it is in fact impossible to overcome its defense. It diminishes the chances of future attacks and establishes its superiority. Neoliberalism adopts similar strategies: as it builds our cities, it protects its establishment and at the same time builds the belief that it is an unavoidable and necessary force that has now become seemingly irreversible. If the neoliberal city does not discourage an attacker per se, it inculcates a passive relationship toward the development of the city and removes to a great distance the potential for action. In either case, it has guaranteed its own protection.

Well, almost.

The protection isn’t fully guaranteed simply because, while cities can act as an important means to a monist end, means can change hands. As the hedgehog will eventually come to learn, the fox has, in its many ways, developed a way to indeed attack the hedgehog. If the fox doesn’t know one big thing, it certainly has found one big trick: the sudden fall of liquid over the hedgehog, such as urine, for example, or rolling it into a river, will cause the hedgehog to uncurl, at which point the fox will be able to eat the said hedgehog. That is to say that amid the prowess of neoliberal predominance, there are breaches within which to operate and challenge the ways the city is: how it can be used, experienced, perceived, and lived. If the hedgehog serves to illustrate the modes of current urban development, the fox becomes an analogy to the free event, building, with its constant struggle and creativity, the dialectic of the planned city and the dwelled-in one.

The 1960s avant-garde understood this dialectic and provided a discourse that addressed the city in very powerful ways: the return to the everyday by the Smithsons, the playgrounds of Aldo van Eyck, or the critiques of Reyner Banham, Paul Barker, Peter Hall and Cedric Price, exposed in *Non-Plan: an experiment in freedom*,[5] are examples of how looking at the free event helps in looking back on the whole with fresh eyes. While the Smithsons and van Eyck advocated the acknowledgment of the individual in reaction to the mass development by the Modernists, Banham and his acolytes positioned their discourse against individualistic urbanization. What could appear at first as two different positions worked in fact toward a common objective, that is the recognition of the qualities of any given individual, of his or her capacity and need to be able and allowed to recognize himself or herself amongst others, underlying an equivalence between the means and ends pertaining to each individual and the need for a space in which this freedom can be enacted. In this sense, the avant-garde proposed a pluralist view of the city, a view entailing a negative liberty. They recognized that, as are human’s desires, the city’s goals are many and reach beyond our capacity, as

5. Banham, Reyner , Paul Barker, Peter Hall and Cedric Price. 1969. “Non-Plan: an experiment in freedom.” In *New society’* 338, March 20, 1969, 435–443.

specialists of urban affairs, to list them all and act upon our findings with unfailing success. They also recognized that, while the city's goals are diverse, several of them will undoubtedly be in conflict with each other, and thus space should be left available for negotiations to take place. The totalizing view of monist urban development cannot make sense because, as needs the fox, so city dwellers need room for attack, room for play, and room to escape.

The intricacy of any given city lies in the fact that, despite the rigidity we might attribute to it, or that we might desire to build within it, it inevitably prove to be spaces constantly redefined by shifting experience. This implies a city that is seen and one that is perceived, a space filled with differences and oppositions, of multiple situations, entangled in a complex web. So, even if the neoliberal city presents itself as dominant, in a clear opposition with that of the dweller, there are multiple and shifting subdialectics amongst the grounded layers of the urban. Free from the ordering of planning and master plans, the events of the city act on their own, as multiple foxes running through the streets, looking for, exploring, learning from what comes to them and from what they themselves create. Some cities will obviously respond more freely to the possibility of change and challenge, but even within the stricter ones, the better-organized ones, the better-controlled ones, there always remains an area within which, even at the risk of being illegal or repressed, action remains a possibility. This is why demonstrations take place within cities; this is why wars and revolutions happen in cities. If a city is a means for coercing its population, the city will infallibly, at one point or another, become the means for change.

Along with the free event, there also exists a physical manifestation of the fox. Empty buildings, lots, or areas caught between serviceable buildings, forgotten behind infrastructures, hiding within fences, leftover, abandoned, or simply deemed unworthy of construction are the antithesis of neoliberalism: they are places where chance is possible, where ad-hoc situations are welcomed and where appropriations are the engine of their well-being. Also known as *terrains vagues*, they are an anti-thesis to neoliberalism because they are both reminiscent of an economic failure and the locus of imaginative beginnings. It is no surprise that terrains vagues have become, over the past years, among the favorite spaces for art installations, demonstrations, sit-ins, urban camping, and the like. While its true nature is really that of a stagnant capital, the terrain vague reverses its financial downturn into possible urban opportunities. When considered as a network of open land, in the sense of "physically empty" as much as in the sense of "open-ended," they generate an independent network within which an alternative urban system can take place.

One such system appears in well-defined areas where the fox is at its strongest: areas of anticipated transformation, inhabited terrains vagues, or what I shall call a *vague urbain*. While large-scale developments are busy redefining central, or even peripheral areas of cities, there often remain substantial inhabited areas that are completely neglected, overseen, ignored; that in fact defy and challenge how the city is to be perceived and lived. Though the logic of my argument suggests that we should simply be content that such areas exist, it also implies that their state of vagueness is only temporary and that, eventually, they will fall under pressure. The question is really how long they will resist and to what cost. But while they are indeed resisting, they provide a space for inhabitants to put their cleverness into play and to demonstrate how the ingenuity entailed in times of need and of urban *laissez-faire* can invent and create

alternative possible perceptions and uses of the city. Contrary to the terrain vague, these areas do not create an independent network as such, but create, within their well-defined boundaries, thriving urban systems. Just as an ecosystem organizes itself in ways that sustain its various parts, the vague urbain develops an independent organizational mode of operation. Considered in terms of sustainable communities, the model of the vague urbain is near perfect—if we oversee the quality of actual living conditions: walkability, local economy, mixed-used areas, active local culture, inclusive participation are all to a large extent present. What truly differs from the politically correct model is that the independent organization can only be temporary, can only exist because eyes are looking away or because no one has yet managed or dared to venture within its limits. Until land and properties are sold and occupants evicted, until "proper" replacement quarters are built, vagues urbains offer the possibility for the most basic, ordinary, banal, free activities to take place, in ways that make sense to its inhabitants and in which negative liberty can find its space of negotiation.

The danger underlying the engagement with the vague urbain is twofold: one might seek to find, within the practices of the vague, an opportunistic ground from which to attack the neoliberal city; one might also, in a desire for self or even collective comforting, engage the vague with a preemptive nostalgia for the opportunities that will soon disappear. While both dangers are common responses, and indeed quite valid in their own right, they overlook the actual potential of the vague as the locus for a discourse on the history of events and for a survey of alternative everyday practices. Both of these potentialities can serve to establish the validity of negative spaces within a city's fabric.

In his closing argument of the *Two concepts of liberty*, Berlin states:

> Pluralism, with the measure of "negative" liberty that it entails, seems to me a truer and more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal "positive" self-mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind. It is truer because it does, at least, recognize the fact that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another.[6]

This simple recognition, that hopes, desires, goals, and practices do, in fact, cohabit within a given city, is the first step toward the creation of spaces for their materialization. This recognition is also a tool with which to maneuver and maintain equilibrium between the hedgehog and the fox since they have, after all, to share the same forest: the recognition is the means to keep the hedgehog and the fox within a healthy relation. In this way, the city might be used to both ends: it can gain terrain, but it can also offer room for or be welcoming to the free event. It thus seems essential that we consider, as often as it is possible, the minute event, the punctual, the bizarre, the unusual, or, one could say, the fox. Doing so, we eventually also recognize that the unexpected in everyday life contains the means for challenging monism; it bears our freedom to choose. But it seems most essential that we learn from these considerations in order to be able to maintain, at the very least, a dualism within our cities. If we achieve in doing so, we might very well be in a position to transform these considerations into actual urban practices, so as to leave room for the Robins of our time.

6. Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*. 241.

demolition on Nassif Al-Yazigi Street




HONDA
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260164
LIBAN

Part 1

Enough room for the present time

or why we should pay attention to the particular

> Since universal world-time is gearing up to outstrip the time of erstwhile localities in historical importance, it is now a matter of urgency that we reform the "whole" dimension of the general history so as to make way for the "fractal" history of the limited but precisely located event.[7]

Writing these words in 1996 in his *Un Paysage d'événements*, Paul Virilio proposed that the accumulation of events creates a relief, or landscape, by which history unfolds. While many of these events might not be related in any way, they influence, as a whole, our understanding of time and the meanings we attribute to subsequent events. Because Virilio was mostly concerned with the acceleration of time, especially in the then-emerging world of technology and media, he emphasized the implications of, and major role played by, communication technologies in our daily lives. Exploring the relations linking history to war, which is not my concern here, his insights are useful in understanding how the mediation creates—despite our immediate interest in present events—a flattened level upon which all is laid out, as though on a common surface. That is to say that, even if we seem to live in the moment, all events acquire an equal, undifferentiated importance. One could argue that we pay attention to events for their potential contribution to the making of history, rather than for their respective qualities as particular incidents. This historical perception assumes that we progressively come to a global view of the world, of humanity and history, as if all were simultaneous, comparable, and graspable. Virilio spoke of this simultaneity as the "dematerialization," the "depersonalization", and the "derealization" of everyday life: a building of history that both embeds and negates the singular event, removing its value as a meaningful actualization of the everyday.

This depersonalization plays a similar role as that of alienation in Marx's discourse. The transformation of one's labor into objects of value, or commodities, governing the activity of men and women is the source of alienation identified by Marx: a process within which a worker becomes foreign to the world he lives in. Marx showed that by selling labor power to bourgeois society, capitalism came to own the labor process and the products created by the workers, as well as their sense of fellow species-beings. In a similar sense, the words of Virilio propose that while events do happen, their reality is so far removed from us that they become their own entity, separate from our ability to engage and to participate. The reality in which we live, or in which we think we live, is in dissonance with the world that is actually unfolding around us. But in Marx's view, everything is accompanied by its contrary; good things are inextricably linked to bad ones and, conversely, bad things contain the seeds of the

7. Virilio, Paul. 1996. *A Landscape of Events.* Cambridge, Mass.: the MIT Press, xi.

good. Marx indeed thought that the possibility of change was rooted in these contradictions, within the dialectic of incompatible elements and realities. For him, cities had this bizarre characteristic of being pregnant with their contrary: finding freedom in overwhelming situations, laughter through misery, possibilities in the impossible. In resonance with Marx's line of thought, Henri Lefebvre claimed that everyday life possessed a dialectical nature: while it is constantly colonized by commodity, it is also the realm of self-realization; while one feels alienated in his or her everyday life, it is also the realm of meaningful social resistance. In Lefebvre's discourse, nothing can escape everyday life, as all participate in its making: institutions, power, politics, economy. Any form of change would have to emerge and come back to everyday life. He asserts, in *Cleaning the Ground*, that there are moments when these "larger" categories of life, those that might be thought of as constituting the domain of history, are brought down to encounter the everyday. There they are confronted by the will of everyday people demanding the transformation of their representations:

> grounded together, people declare that these institutions, these "representations" are no longer acceptable and no longer represent them. Then, united in groups, in classes, in peoples, men are no longer prepared to live as before, and are no longer able to do so. They reject whatever "represented", maintained and chained them to their previous everyday life. These are the great moments of history: the stirrings of revolutions. At this point, the everyday and the historical come together and even coincide, but in the active and violently negative critique which history makes of the everyday.[8]

8. Lefebvre, Henri. 1961/2002. *Critique of Everyday Life, vol.2*. New York : Verso, 21.

It is through everyday life, and only through everyday life, that such transformations may occur, for global capitalism and its ways of managing the everyday is, as would say Lefebvre, nothing without many everyday lives. Thus, by looking into the small and apparently irrelevant details of the everyday, one might be able to understand the larger structures in play, and potentially change the lives of many.

Despite the words of Lefebvre, the question remains: why are we more interested in the general making of history than concerned with the history of events, as Virilio would put it? Why don't everyday facts of life invoke as much genuine interest as does general history? A number of preliminary answers could be attempted: everyday life is nothing more than a repetition of banalities, while history can be a chronological set of "meaningful" events; everyday life is boring, filled with meaningless characters, while history has stories, heroes; or again, everyday life is all that is left when all things meaningful have been displaced into history. But beyond the segregation of everyday events from history, could it be possible that we ascribe more meaning to representation and mediation, to history, compared to everyday life because the present is too messy, unpredictable, and frightening? Reflecting upon a contemporary interpretation of utopia, Zygmund Bauman proposes that, left to negotiate with innumerable, unannounced, unpleasant, and uncomfortable events, our inability to defend ourselves against unpredictable adversities leaves us powerless, frightened, and fearful. As our interests in tradition and utopia demonstrate, we rather build history, i.e. comprehend how events were shaped, set anchors within tradition, or project ourselves in a world better suited to pursue our journey—toward utopia. It is in the freezing of time that utopia and tradition find their powerful attraction. In both instances, to borrow a line of Jeremy Till, "the architect

can edit the world, can appropriate the bits that are full of aesthetic or technical potential and discard those that are not, along with the scars of history [and] the fright of uncertainty."[9] While this could also be said of other urban professionals and a large portion of the population, it is in the escape through time, past or future, in beautiful imagined realities, or in the making of history, that one avoids the true present.

Continuing with Bauman's argument, this ever-present fear of reality has forced us to move "the land of solutions and cures from the far away into the here and now."[10] Satisfying our every immediate need as an accomplishment of our projected desires, Bauman argues that we are no longer living toward imagined worlds, as did the gardener in the projection of his garden, but as hunters who seek the immediate reward of the hunt, we now live inside immediate utopias. This new form of utopia, that of the individualistic consumer society, can only be shortsighted, moving from one immediate personal utopia to the next, doomed to live in the instant away from possible alternatives grounded in the real. It is the fear of allowing our lives to be reduced to the here and now, says Lefebvre, to the ordinariness of everyday realities that drive us to flee into shortsighted alternatives and, through this process, drive us also to neglect and disregard such places as the everyday, as the derelict areas of our cities, as the haphazard and inconsequential meetings on the street.

While Bauman's thesis can be observed around us in neoliberal culture, in fashion advertising, real estate imagery, and urban development, the "here and now" sits on a double-sided coin, as Marx might point out. Indeed, amidst the desires of immediate fulfillment—here and now—lies what is actually here and now: found situations, places, and uses, each concerned with meaningful interstices, textures, light and materials, spaces and places, practices and people which constitute the other, real, city.

In *Le Droit à la ville*, Henri Lefebvre called for an "experimental utopia" according to which the creation of an ideal community could only be pursued through the study of everyday life. He asserted that everydayness is not doomed to an immutable grayness but is rather filled with unaccomplished possibilities.[11] His proposal suggested that the creation of an ideal community could only be pursued through the study of everyday life, in everyday urban settings. Indeed, he believed that the city of tomorrow could be built from the dreams of today,[12] if only architects and urban planners could appreciate the significations, indications, and auguries perceived and lived by those who inhabit the real: everyday life harbors within itself the possibility of its own transformation. We only ought to support what is already there and help it to emerge and grow. This proposal implies that there is, embedded within the existing context, a world to be discovered and valued. There are, therefore, some things that organize day-to-day life on their own terms, some things that resist pressures from others. In dialogue with the Situationists, Lefebvre proposed that the idea of resistance is in fact at the heart of the found situation and that it is within this resistance that possibilities are born and where the relations

9. Till, Jeremy. 2009. *Architecture Depends.* Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 88.

10. Bauman, Zygmunt. 2005. "Melting Modernity: Living in Utopia." Lecture, Milband Lecture Series at London School of Economics, London, UK (November 27).

11. Lefebvre, Henri. 1968. *Le Droit à la ville*. Paris: Anthropos, 25.

12. Lefebvre, Henri, Eleanore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas. 1996. *Writings on Cities.* Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 152.

between present and future are lived.[13]

For the Situationists, to change everyday life implied the transformation of the spaces of the city, the transformation of their ambiances and appreciations. In order to achieve such transformations, the city would have to be thoroughly surveyed, walked, and experienced, mapped, in short, so that lesser known or misunderstood spaces such as interstices, derelict and out of the way places, could be kept from mainstream culture and used to rebuild the social space of the city.

Not so distant from Lefebvre's ideas, and surely closer to contemporary cities, at least in time, if not in ideology, David Harvey proposes a "dialectical utopianism" in which the ideal is "materially grounded in social and ecological conditions but which nevertheless emphasizes possibilities and alternatives for human action through the will to create."[14] It is in the critical engagement with the world as found that the architect can still maintain a hope against hope, says Harvey, turning away from mere utopia, from a "realm of pure fantasy that does not matter,"[15] and as would add Till, "finding hope within the conflictual ground of reality."[16]

In architectural terms, the idea of resistance emerged at the period of Lefebvre's first volume of *Critique de la vie quotidienne* in the late 1940s, as a young Aldo van Eyck proposed that traffic circles, edges of street, left-over spaces, trash-filled backyards, and abandoned buildings, all of random shapes and sizes, in various states of neglect, be cleaned up and transformed into playgrounds. Liane Lefaivre thoroughly documented this near thirty-year project and counted these play areas almost to a thousand.[17] While most European post-war reconstruction followed the teachings of the *Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne* (CIAM), van Eyck argued that the modernist model was overly mechanical, leading to a clear neglect of any immediate qualities found in existing conditions, and disregarding what were thought of as minor spaces. In a presentation at the CIAM Otterlo conference of 1959, van Eyck went so far as to claim that rarely had the profession been granted such an opportunity as the post-World War II reconstruction, yet never had the profession failed so miserably at its task.[18]

The proposition made by van Eyck responded to local and immediate needs: no place in the city was too poor for architecture to take place. Van Eyck considered the city as a changing, temporary phenomenon, and his parks as important moments in a city under reconstruction. Organized with geometrical patterns and various arrangements of metal bars for children to climb up and hang from, these playgrounds also appealed to adults who could sit on benches, or somewhere on the edge of a sandpit, to meet and chat, strengthening social bonds. In looking carefully at the city fabric and in recognizing both the qualities and the large number of neglected spaces, van Eyck was able to insert in the city the idea of the in-between as a transformative strategy. In seeking

13. Lefebvre. *Critique de la vie quotidienne,* 198.

14. Harvey, David. 2000. *Spaces of Hope.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 232.

15. Ibid.

16. Till. *Architecture Depends,* 191.

17. Lefaivre, Liane, Ingeborg de Roode, Rudi Fuchs. 2002. *Aldo van Eyck: the Playgrounds and the City.* Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; Rotterdam: NAi Publishers.

18. "This was probably the most famous speech of his career, delivered at the Otterlo conference. Its impact was felt all over the world and marked a change in mood of the profession accompanied by a creative rethinking of modern architecture." Lefaivre, Liane, Alexander Tzonis. 1999. *Aldo van Eyck, Humanist Rebel.* Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 13.

to find enthusiastic possibilities hidden within the real, in-between the events and places of the ordinary, he revealed the latent potentials embedded in these derelict sites. With the discovery of situations located between adjacent buildings, in the space and time between these buildings, van Eyck proposed that the city played a direct role in providing new relationships between people.

Peter and Alison Smithson also proposed a subversion of the modernist dogma: clearly anti-utopian and in line with van Eyck's work, with whom they collaborated in Team X, they assumed a friendly seditious attitude. As van Eyck spoke of the relational in-between of found situations, the Smithsons engaged a more direct recognition of the found. Their "as found" spoke indeed of immediacy, rawness, and material presence; it communicated an openness where prosaic environments could reenergize reality. While the Modernists gave prevalence to the "whole," the Smithsons sought to endow "parts" with their own internal disciplines and complexities. While the Modernists spoke of architecture as a magnificent play of masses brought together under the light, the Smithsons claimed that their interest in the ordinary and the banal did not mean that architecture would lose sight of its objective: rather, ordinariness and banality were to become the source for building new perspectives, this time "real" under the light. Perceived as a place for change and transformation, the informal everyday could be thought of as a key linking past, present, and future: instead of engulfing the weakened city with grand utopian idealism, they proposed an urban vision empowered by a recognition and transformation with and within the everyday.

The grand ordinariness and banalities to which the authors I have cited refer and upon which van Eyck and the Smithsons built, is not a mere leftist fancy. Rather, the etymology of the word banal supports their claim to find purpose, value, and the coming together of a people within the all-around-us, rather than a simplistic waste of time. Indeed, in medieval France, every time a village was founded, two things would be built: a chapel and a bread oven. Central to communal life, to spirituality and survival, these two buildings, one more of a machine than the other, played a central role in establishing a community. Finding its root in the feudal system, a *ban* designated the "public," that is, all of those who, together, form a people, submitted to the same law; it also meant the extent of land to which a given lord had the power to make the law, thus giving the meaning to *banlieue*, literally designating the land within a mile around[19] and within whose limits extended the authority of a jurisdiction. A *banalité* was the equivalent of a tax paid by the villagers to the lord of the land so that they could make use of the things said *banales*, that is, those things destined for public use, such as bread ovens.[20] While the *ban* meant that the freeman might still choose to use, or not, the banal oven, the slave, on the other hand, had to eat banal bread, or starve. The same went for wine where the lord held monopoly over its making and distribution, forcing villagers to buy from him (though it is said that monks would sometimes produce and sell *ad bannum* wine). If a villager chose not to drink wine, thus not buying any, "the lord shall pour a four-gallon measure over the man's roof; if the wine runs down, the tenant must pay for it; if it runs upwards, he shall pay nothing,"[21] as reports George Gordon Coulton in his account of medieval villages. Though there was a clear

19. A *lieue* is equivalent to the distance a man can walk within an hour, which is approximately three kilometers or one mile.

20. Court de Gébelin, Antoine. 1777. *Monde primitif, analysé et comparé avec le monde moderne, considéré dans les origines Françoises ; ou dictionnaire étymologique de la langue Françoise.* Paris: Chez L'auteur.

21. Coulton, George Gordon. 1925/1989. *The Medieval Village.* New York : Dover Publications.

hierarchy in who benefited from the use of *bans*— resembling, to some extent, our various contemporary divisions—there is, in the original meaning of the word, a strong sense of building a community in which all eat the bread baked in the same oven. Carrying loaves of risen bread from their house, marked with a special stamp so as to recognize which loaf came from which house once the bread had been baked, it is easy to picture villagers gathering in the morning around the banal oven, forging a sense of community while waiting for the bread to be baked.

If in medieval French, *banel* meant, literally, "communal," the word grew from open to everyone, or that which is at the disposition to all, to "commonplace," "ordinary," and "petty," to finally evolve to our current understanding of banal as "of no interest." But up to the late 18th century, things described as banal carried with them a positive sense of community, of worth, and of what made life possible. If bread ovens are no longer commonly found in contemporary villages, let alone cities, the medieval meaning of banal helps us see that the things of the everyday world are not insignificant; rather they are perhaps the site of possible signification, community, meaning, and value. Banal things, events, places, and people might very well be the stronghold of what truly characterizes our experience of the city. They might very well embed the past and future within the present. As Paul Ricoeur argued in *Temps et Récit*, analyzing the aporia of time through Saint Augustin's *Confessions*, the present is thick with the past and future on either side of it, not as three independent times, but as a triple present: the present of the past and the present of the future are part of the present of the present.[22] The present, the now, is a mediator linking past and future, an action or practice that enacts, simultaneously, memory and expectation within the real. Banalities of the everyday thus mediate and organize the relations between things past, things to come and things as they are. It is this articulation, through practice, that constitutes the most elementary purpose of the present. Rather than fleeing into imagined futures or curling up within tradition, in the hope of finding better things, the banal held within the present plays an essential role in our ability to move between past and future. So doing, the present dissolves the barriers of time; it is rendered pregnant with productive possibilities, supporting the positions defended by van Eyck, the Smithsons, Lefebvre, and the entire filiation of discourse on the everyday.

In a thorough account of this lineage, Micheal Sheringham comes to propose four principal characteristics of what constitutes the everyday. Firstly, the everyday inheres in the way things such as eating, shopping, walking down a street, are part of manifold lived experience. It is a continuity of eventless events, what Virilio might call a chronotopy, in which space and time are acted upon by use. Secondly, the everyday, as the banal, implies community: it comprises other people. Thirdly, historicity, i.e. the building of our comprehension of the world, is embodied within repeated and familiar events. Fourthly, only practice makes the everyday visible. If made the object of scrutiny, it dissolves into statistics and data and no longer holds contexts, stories, and history together: "The everyday cannot be reduced to its content...The everyday invokes something that holds these things (driving to work, getting the groceries) together, their continuity and rhythms...something that is adverbial, modal, and ultimately ethical, because it has to do with individual and collective *art de vivre*."[23]

22. Ricoeur, Paul. 1983. *Temps et récit, tome 1: L'Intrigue et le récit historique.* Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 119.

23. Sheringham, Micheal. 2007/2008. "Configuring the Everyday", In *The Everyday Documents of Contemporary Art,* edited by Johnstone, S., 141-147. London and Massachusetts:

The everyday is what we never see for the first time, said Maurice Blanchot. Though it is now, within an overly familiar present, it is perhaps only what we see again, not the exceptional or the sought after, that holds our true sense of the urban environment.

So why should we pay attention to the everyday? As suggested thus far, we should pay attention to the particular, the banal, to the present, because the already-there—the experienceable—harbors within itself the space for intersubjectivities and communities to grow, for differences to come together within a space of negotiation. In order to build a promising future, one has to come to the present. We thus need to brush away the fear that the everyday is hopeless, fearful, or simply ordinary. We must admit that found situations, places, and daily events contain the imaginative requirements of a different future, if one is willing to observe and is prepared to admit the possibility that creative potential might be stored in the most unexpected places.

While a traditional sense of utopia tells us to invent something entirely new, out of time, out of place, an imaginative future that will never be, tradition tells us there is much to learn from the past; it keeps us also, to some extent, in a time out of time, in a past that lingers in its longing for becoming. If both ends of the spatiotemporal spectrum are complicit in the building of history, they also share a healthy distance from the present and constitute the two sides of an everyday coin. It thus becomes possible to think of the present as the real unattainable time and space, suggesting that something can be learned from the "here" and that the city as found is something we need to imagine. I will even argue further: not only is the city "as found" something we need to imagine, the city as a site of the present can provide, in all its originality and potentialities, the means to resist what Bauman called "the shortsightedness of the here and now" and become a vision we can aspire to reach.

The unselfconscious tradition

At 3 o'clock on March 16, 1972, a first building of the infamous housing project *Pruitt-Igoe*, built in 1954 by Minoru Yamasaki in St. Louis, Missouri, was demolished. The story of Pruitt-Igoe is quite dramatic and has served as a cautionary tale of public housing in North America. The 33 buildings, comprising a total of 2,780 apartments, arranged amidst a large area in which parks, playgrounds, and parking were meant to be integrated, was a wonderful demonstration of the modernist dogma. But this demonstration was soon to turn nightmarish, a place for crime to flourish, for racial segregation to be exacerbated; it would also bring Charles Jencks to declare the death of Modernism.[24]

Following steady population growth since the 1870s, the center of St. Louis had become a crowded place by the 1940s: housing stock was deteriorating, families still lived in 19th century apartments, sometimes with shared amenities. As Missouri was still very much segregated, white families were fleeing the center for the newly built suburban areas, leaving their houses and apartments to be taken by low-income, mostly black, families. The city's central administration thought the inner city had to be redeveloped to entice businesses to open and white middle-class families to stay. Though an early plan had called for two to three stories of residential blocks and public parks to be built as a replacement for the run-down neighborhood, high-density public housing was the

Whitechapel & MIT Press, 142.

24. Jencks, Charles. 1984. *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture.* New York: Rizzoli.

city's final decision. They argued that the denser population would raise value and revenues, increase places for shopping, and make more sense for investing in parks and playgrounds.

Harry Truman's Housing Act of 1949 allowed for this vision to take shape: the city administration could acquire the land, take buildings down, and sell the land back to private developers who could then build public housing with the financial help of the US government,[25] a strategy Lewis Mumford thought well-suited to build the new slums of the future. Yamasaki's firm was hired in 1950. The initial project, like the initial city plan, proposed a mixture of high-rise and low-rise buildings, walk-ups, parks, and playgrounds; but it was soon replaced by a more economical version in which apartments were deliberately small, and density high. While the large buildings tried a number of strategies to encourage social interaction and community building—with anchor floors on which more amenities were available and elevators that would only stop every other floor so that residents would have to walk up and down in the building—most buildings remained vacant for many years and were eventually boarded up. The demolition took place incrementally until 1976. The reasons behind the project's failures are many and cannot be blamed solely to the architecture of the buildings: of course white middle-class flight to suburbia, unemployment, politics, and segregation all had a role to play. But one has to wonder about the wisdom of such a heavy-handed replacement of an urban fabric, as rundown as it might be.

While this dramatic failure must certainly have weighed heavily on residents' lives, it confirmed, to some extent, one of Jencks' predictions. In his *Architecture 2000 & Beyond*, Jencks made a series of predictions about the future of architecture and cities as the turn of the century was approaching. If the rate of successes or failures of these predictions is somewhat irrelevant to the present study, it is important to look into the distinctions Jencks made between the various ways, or traditions, architecture was organized in the 20th century, bearers of his now famous *Evolutionary tree of the year 2000*. At a glance, Jencks argues that the sphere of architectural practices is divided into six major traditions. Opposed to the intuitive—which comprises the natural, the organic, metabolic, and biomorphic—is the logical tradition, that of the engineer, the mathematician and includes the parametric and geometric. The activist and idealist traditions follow, with the former being the tradition of the utopian, the futurist, and the revolutionist, and the latter linked to the rational, the purist, and the metaphysical. Come finally the self-conscious and unselfconscious traditions. Put simply, the self-conscious tradition pertains to the realm of the architect, of the urban designer, of those who make decisions about the well-being of the city with a full understanding of the urban issues at

25. Following the end of World War II, the US Congress passed the Housing Act as a policy to provide necessary help for urban renewal, boost the economy, and see to the welfare of all. As such, Section 2 of the Housing Act stated:"The Congress declares that the general welfare and security of the Nation and the health and living standards of its people require housing production and related community development sufficient to remedy the serious housing shortage, the elimination of substandard and other inadequate housing through the clearance of slums and blighted areas, and the realization as soon as feasible of the goal of a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family, thus contributing to the development and redevelopment of communities and to the advancement of the growth, wealth, and security of the Nation. The Congress further declares that such production is necessary to enable the housing industry to make its full contribution toward an economy of maximum employment, production, and purchasing power." (Mumford, Lewis. 1983. "Housing Act of 1949, Public Law 171, July 15, 1949." In *America Builds: Source Documents in American Architecture and Planning*, edited by Leland M. Roth. New York: Harper and Row, 515.)

stake, while the unselfconscious is, well, the opposite. The unselfconscious tradition can be defined as the spheres of action and decision which, "while purposeful on a small scale, are made without regard or reference to the whole or centralized control system which exists"[26] in a given location. Understood as such, the land of the unselfconscious becomes wide and large: any slum, any illegal settlement in any developing country or city; in North America, any self-proclaimed architect who builds a house in the forest, who carves a road and improvises other infrastructures; or in Jonathan Hill's words, any illegal architect at work.[27] The novelty of Jencks's tree is that, while still divided into time lapses of 10-year increments, the understanding of history is very fluid across time and categories, finding possible connections between most.

But what is most relevant is grasping the scale of the unselfconscious tradition. While most of us architects, urban designers, and the like are concerned with five of the traditions, it is the unselfconscious one that occupies most of our environment. Though Jencks does not reference his numbers, it is not farfetched to believe that his claim of 80% unselfconscious building must be close enough to reality. In any case, to borrow the words of Bruce Mau: "architecture is largely irrelevant to the great mass of the world's population."[28] The example of large, crowded urbanized areas with minimal infrastructure, commonly identified as slums, is by any measure the most obvious example of the unselfconscious. While they may represent, to some, an opportunity for creativity, for humanitarian work and so forth, they may also be, for others, a wasteland to be dealt with, pushed away, erased, negated. Whether one stands on one side of the fence or the other, unselfconscious areas unquestionably generate countless statistics and are laden with all sorts of intentions:

> Before the 19th century, it would have been conceived, if at all, as background—as man's biological condition from which he distinguished himself through action. But after this point, because of egalitarian ideas and slum conditions, it was both romanticized as "vernacular" and debased as "mass culture" produced by the "masses". In our own time, the revolutionists eye it with expectation, hoping to lead it out of exploitation; the organization of men and large firms hope to sell it their services; the dictators approach it with the desire for order and control; the reformers hope to ameliorate its conditions through piecemeal legislation. Each group in turn projects its image of humanity in the abstract and then hopes to shape it.[29]

Independently of their true intentions, such hopes are for the most part in vain because, as Jencks continues, the "unselfconscious tradition is continually intractable."[30] As would a soft or malleable material, it finds its own ways of building, shaping, and distancing itself from the powers at play. In their ability to invent themselves, grow and sometimes even become relatively prosperous, the makers of the unselfconscious demonstrate extraordinary creativity and resilience.

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26. Jencks, Charles. 1971. *Architecture 2000 Predictions and Methods.* Londin: Studio Vista, 51.

27. Hill, Jonathan. 2000. *The Illegal Architect.* London: Black Dog Publishing.

28. Mau, Bruce. 2011. "You can do better." *Architect,* January 3, 2011. http://www.architectmagazine.com/architects/you-can-do-better_o

29. Jencks, *Architecture 2000 & Beyond*, 51.

30. Ibid.

Jencks's unselfconscious tradition is also very pertinent for our understanding of the dynamics of contexts in transformation: where pockets of the urban fabric have not yet been razed, but where complete transformation is imminent. It teaches us that the context in which we live has been built through time, across movements and know-how, and that slowly, incrementally, cities have built themselves with their own inner logic.

It also makes us consider the unselfconscious as the true context within which we live and teaches us that in the midst of the planned city are spaces, buildings, lots, areas, neighborhoods, that have come to be what they are primarily because they make sense to those who inhabit them. Looking at these areas thus becomes essential for understanding urban practices and learning from their ingenuity, integration, and use of public space before all is taken down.

While St. Louis came as an opportunity for Jencks to proclaim his most famous statement, the drastic transformations that took place—first from an inner-city slum to a modernist city, and then into what has become a large empty area, where a growing urban forest is home to chain link fences, abandoned roads, warehouses, and few community buildings—couldn't be a more perfect lesson for anyone driving a bulldozer. In his predictions, Jencks supposed that the unselfconscious tradition would continue to grow and would extend to other areas such as health and education. He was right in thinking so, as we now see a growing number of grassroots initiatives all over the developing world, community and neighborhood initiatives around North America and Europe, etc. What was not mentioned in his prediction—and perhaps he did not foresee this challenge—is that the unselfconscious would need to fight very hard, often losing the battle, against real-estate speculation and a neoliberalist economy.

façade on Tyan Street





Part 2

Leaving some room for the vague urbain

or why we should extend our desire for landscape

It seems that the old pattern described by Marx—in which poorer people inhabit central areas of cities, on centrally located and highly valuable land, paying high rents on a meager wage, obliged to live in overcrowded conditions—is still very relevant to current conditions. New cities of China, cities in the various states of the Persian Gulf, whether adjacent to old urban fabrics or created from nothing in harsh desert climates, have much to learn from the process of large-scale urban developments in existing cities. When profitable urban development eventually catches up with derelict yet inhabited areas, a series of steps follows: residents are expropriated; buildings are taken down; land is sold; construction of retail space and luxury apartment towers begins; land value goes up; a different group of people moves in; former residents find themselves other areas to live in until the next wave of development reaches them again. It is an open secret that cities today have to be competitive and entrepreneurial for their own survival. Negative imagery needs to be swept under the carpet to convey to new investors that a given city is worthy of their capital. Cities go through branding campaigns, showing off their new logos and newly renovated city centers to attract tourists, foreign qualified workers, and money. While consulting firms are hired to put in place redevelopment master plans, world-renowned architects are courted so that their trademark becomes a demonstration of the city's progressiveness. While these processes create beautiful, clean, and secure cities, they also flatten what Andy Merrifield calls "practical dystopian politics." In his *Dialectical Urbanism*, Merrifield insists that there exists a dialectic between urbanization and the lived city, and that it must not be resolved:

> It's a contradiction that needs to be harnessed somehow, not collapsed; worked through, sometimes lived with, not wiped out. Authenticity will arrive, if it arrives, by going forward through this dialectic not by having recourse to some romantic non-contradictory but nonexistent ideal.[31]

While the processes of urbanization seem to be mostly about displacement and reconquest, continues Merrifield, about the reordering, if not to say the "supremacying" of spaces of luxury, he insists that claims, ideas, projects, initiatives about cities should rather grow from the ground, should be located first in the street, in urban public space, in everyone's everyday life. If cities, indeed, wish to show themselves as progressive, they should find ways, amidst the corporatization and privatization of their spaces, to integrate "struggle, conflict, and contradiction into a passionate and just urban life."[32] The city needs to find ways of asserting itself as a space of its inhabitants, if not to overturn the current processes,

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31. Merrifield. 2002. *Dialectical Urbanism: Social Struggle in the Capitalist City.* New York: Monthly review Press, 14.

32. Ibid., 170.

at least to balance the place it leaves open. David Harvey brings the argument a step further when he says that: "we live, after all, in a world in which the rights of private property and the profit rate trump all other notions of rights."[33] Arguing beyond the right of the citizen to have access to decision-making processes as originally argued by Lefebvre, Harvey suggests that the right to the city should attain the level of other human rights: independently of the means of urbanization at play, these means should not have the power to dispossess city dwellers from the place in which they have established themselves. Because the right to the city revolves around the production of urban space, it is those who live in the city, it is they who contribute to its everyday, who should be in a position to claim the right to the city.[34] The fundamental right Harvey speaks about, building from Lefebvre's proposal, is thus not linked to a citizenry given at birth or through lengthy immigration processes, but one that is given to those who inhabit.

Areas about to undergo major urban renovation are examples of where the right to the city, in the sense argued by Harvey, is in dire straits and often threatened. While some of these areas might be empty and carry the definition of vacant land, there remains a class of areas in which communities live, and sometimes thrive; but which, for various reasons, have remained on the margins of the idea of the ideal city.

Considering these inhabited areas as vacant land requires that the breadth of the term "vacant" be explored. With his contribution to *Anyplace*, published in 1995, Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubio became central to this exploration in architecture, urban design, and the arts, as he used the term *terrain vague* to address "vacancy" in the post-industrial city. Reflecting on the tradition of photography as a mediator in the representation and perception of nature, architecture, and the city, he wondered why, since the 1970s, urban photographers had inaugurated a new sensibility, perhaps even a fascination, for derelict spaces in the urban. This new gaze, he claimed, was the "most solvent sign with which to indicate what cities are and what our experience of them is."[35] As a continuation of the romantic imagination portrayed in early photography of nature, or of people living in large cities, photography of terrain vague, "feeds on memories and expectations,"[36] on the strangeness that surrounds, reflecting our insecurity of the other, of the alternative, of past and future. "Photographic images of the terrain vague," he argued, "are territorial indications of strangeness itself, and the aesthetic and the ethical problems that they pose embrace the problematic of contemporary social life."[37] If Solà-Morales Rubio spoke of the terrain vague as a positive fascination, his discourse followed an incompatible parallel with that of the promotion of urban renewal and of the desire for an esthetics of righteousness. Indeed, the terrain vague contains, within its delimitations, the whole of negative representations of the spontaneous, of the illegal, or worse, of the dystopian. If its uncertain future worries, it is its complete disengagement that truly menaces, conceding its space to the imagination of a future no longer anchored in a shared value system and in familiar ways of doing and being. Whether we see in the terrain vague a menacing future or the representation of lost traditions, both perspectives are complicit in disavowing the richness of the present

33. Harvey, David. 2008. "The right to the city." In *New Left Review* 53, September-October: 23–40, 23.

34. Ibid.

35. Solà-Morales Rubio, Ignasi. 1995. "Terrain Vague." In *Anyplace*, edited by Cynthia Davidson. Cambridge, Mass.: the MIT Press, 119.

36. Ibid., 120.

37. Ibid., 122.

and the real, which were, more or less, at the heart of Solà-Morales Rubio's proposal.

As a sign of an economic downturn, it comes with no surprise that the terrain vague finds itself fenced out and marginalized: its status allows for illicit activities to take place, vagrancy, various kinds of pollution or dumping. It is therefore quite common to come across observations on these various unsecured or unwanted areas with the use of a descriptive vocabulary filled with negativity. The simple denomination of these areas demonstrates common disdain: badlands, derelict sites, brown fields, dead zones. We see this again in their descriptive characteristics: uncertain, undefined, imprecise, disengaged. Based on this non-exhaustive set of "qualities" commonly used to describe the terrain vague, one could argue that such sites manifest, land-wise, aspects of Foucault's heterotopias. If Foucault thought of these places as being at odds with standardized, acceptable activities and behaviors, it is easy to imagine the terrain vague as an equivalently obscure, misunderstood place denouncing the "real" city.

Solà-Morales Rubio thought it more suitable to name these areas with a French denomination in order to capture the essence of what he was trying to describe, admitting that there was no equivalent word or expression in the English language. While the French *terrain* translates into *land*, it "connotes a more urban quality," as something "fit for construction."[38] But the word also relates to *territories*, a term "connected with the physical idea of a portion of land in its potentially exploitable state."[39] While *terrain* invokes physicality, *vague* alludes, in French as in English, to the "indeterminate, imprecise, blurred, uncertain."[40] But in French, the word holds a second Latin root: while *vuage* refers to "movement, oscillation, instability, and fluctuation,"[41] as would a wave in English, the French vague finds its second root in *vaccus*, leading to vacant, empty, or unoccupied. Solà-Morales Rubio's terrain vague thus describes a stretch of land, more or less defined but which is ready for use within a given urban territory, but that is, at the time of its description, unused, left behind, overlooked and so on. The term favored by Solà-Morales Rubio was right on the spot as it has received very few alterations within the French interest of such places, besides perhaps the now commonly used *friche*, which is more directly linked to industrial or infrastructural remnants. In the English world though, a variety of terms have emerged since Solà-Morales Rubio, and each have brought a slight variation, or precision, in determining the physical characteristics of the terrain vague, its relation to the urban fabric, its history, or its political agenda.

Amongst these variations, we find American landscape architect Julie Bargmann who speaks of the abandoned industrial landscape as "wasteland." While her work focuses solely on contaminated areas, she sees in the derelict the "fodder of the future,"[42] a strong image to propose that all that is needed to feed the repair of our industrial heritage lies within what we wish to erase. In her book *Toxic Beauty: a Field Guide to Derelict Terrain*, as in her fieldwork, she argues that a creative regeneration of the industrial landscape is necessary if we are to reclaim the grounds left bare by the post-industrialization

38. Ibid., 119.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid., 120.

41. Ibid.

42. Bargmann, Julie. 2003. *Toxic Beauty: A Field Guide to Derelict Terrain.* New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

economy and overturn the devastating danger of inaction. But according to Gil Doron, the abandonment of industrial grounds is only one of many sources for the derelict. Indeed, as he mentions in *The Dead Zone and the Architecture of Transgression*,[43] the simple passing of time, wars and the very nature of capitalism also contribute to creating "waste." While it is the wastelands that most often attract the eye of the architect and urban planner in search of a profitable or high impact value project, they are not the only voids in or around the city. Indeed, Doron speaks of the "dead zone" as being everywhere within the built and inhabited: the dead zone appears as soon as there is a gap in between uses. A matter of hours, of days, or years, everywhere the city holds the potentiality of the "dead," and all comes down to a question of time. For Doron, thus, dead zones do not entail an act of destruction, but are rather linked to the suspension of use, of new planning, linked to underuse or abandonment.

To Lars Lerup, the dead is a "dross": "the ignored, undervalued, unfortunate economic residues of the metropolitan machine."[44] In opposition to the "stims," i.e. places such as shopping malls, box stores, gas stations, the home, the office, the restaurant, the museum—in other words, most approved destinations—the dross is really where events occur, a place not reduced to its interior. In Lerup's view, there is a reversal in value and of worth: while everywhere we go is normally seen as concrete and permanent, it is the left-behind places that hold endurance and reality. Because stims are designed to resist and avoid "threats" and "harsh reality," the dross is the only possible place for a complexity—the city—to take shape.

In landscape terms, the terrain vague becomes a *tiers paysage*, a proposition made by Gilles Clément in his 2004 *Manifeste pour le Tiers Paysage*. As a near direct lineage from Abbé Sieyes' *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers État ?* published in 1789, Clément's understanding of landscape becomes possible when we abandon our stronghold and exploitation of nature and other territories.[45] When first published, Abbé Sieyes's pamphlet played a key role in transforming the meaning of the third estate, from the managing of privileged cities by the bourgeoisie under Louis XIV, to that of the people, of those neglected and looked down upon by the *Ancien Régime*. Published a few months before the official abolition of the feudal system and of the official third estate, Abbé Sieyes's pamphlet set itself in the premises of the revolution with his famous claim :

> *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers État ? Tout.*
> *Qu'a-t-il été jusqu'à présent dans l'ordre politique ? Rien.*
> *Que demande-t-il ? À être quelque chose.*[46]

Abbé Sieyes argued that if the privileged were taken away from power, the nation could become something more. The Third, he claimed, encompasses everything, everyone. But with the dominance of the privileged, all

43. Doron, Gil. 2000. "The Dead Zone and the Architecture of Transgression." In *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action* 4, no. 2: 247–263.

44. Lerup, Lars. 1994/2007. "Stim and Dross: Rethinking the Metropolis." In *On Landscape Urbanism*, edited by Dean Almy, 94–107. Austin: Center for American Architecture and Design, 101.

45. Clément, Gilles. 2004. *Manifeste pour le Tiers Paysage.* Paris: L'Autre Fable, 5.

46. "What is the Third State ? Everything. What has it been in the political order ? Nothing. What does it demand ? To become something." Sieyès, Emmanuel Joseph. 1789/1988. *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers état ?* Paris : Flammarion, 1, (author's translation)

remains oppressed and hindered. Without the privileged, all could flourish and gain freedom.[47] Just as Sieyes's third estate called for the recognition of all those who contribute and constitute the city, yet remain ignored or kept under dreadful conditions, Clément defends the third landscape as the locus for undesired plants to grow and thrive, for wilderness and natural space to reemerge. What links both proposals is first and foremost a desire to protect the undesired and to argue that if space is made for the undesired, unexpected outcomes will grow and become important contributors to the complexity needed for urban and ecological systems to thrive. Thus for the landscape architect, the terrain vague is a necessity in that it welcomes biological diversity without discrimination.[48] It is, as Clément claims, a "blissful oblivion for vagabonds"[49] and constitutes the principal refuge for the undesired and for a "certain expression of diversity."[50]

Despite these various claims coming at the defense of terrains vagues—and to those explored here could be added Berger's *drosscape*,[51] the *derelict land* of Kivell, Roberts and Walker,[52] or Kupers, Miessen and James's *spaces of uncertainty*,[53] to name but a few more—a generally shared discourse and practice sees in the abandoned, the void, the opened, opportunities and projects to be built. While some proposals might be envisioned in the name of idealism or out of sheer financial opportunism, professions involved in the development of cities share a strong tendency toward a creative domination over the "available." This process, which Hans Van Dijk qualifies as the colonization of landscape,[54] is a disciplinary fabrication that justifies the brutal act of so-called necessary transformations. Counting on the shady reputation of terrains vagues, the architectural, urban design, city planning and corporative imagination sees in its availability the promise of a colonizing potential wherein the aesthetic of the ruin is clearly dissociated from the marginal practices that often occupy such places. The result is an interval,[55] as Luc Lévesque calls it, within which opens up a landscape of possibilities: of technical, constructive, economic, social, or programmatic inventions.

Yet terrains vagues are rarely empty. As in Doron's argument where a simple suspension of use creates the dead zone, an act of destruction is not necessary for the transgressive to appear. Rather, transgressive zones are most often generated by a suspension of development or of formal and normative use as pointed out by Lang,[56] or "created and maintained for speculative reasons."[57] Since the terrain vague is, in this depiction, voluntary, one can

47. Ibid., 36.

48. Clément, *Manifeste pour le Tiers Paysage*, 5.

49. Clément, Gilles. 2011. "In Praise of Vagabond." *Qui parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 19, no.2: 275–297, 278.

50. Ibid., 279.

51. Berger, Alan. 2007. *Drosscape: Wasting Land in Urban America.* New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

52. Kivell, Philip, Peter W. Roberts, and Gordon P. Walker. 1998. *Environment, Planning, and Land Use*. Brookfield: Ashgate.

53. Kuppers, Kenny, Markus Miessen, and Wendy James. 2002. *Spaces of Uncertainty*. Wuppertail: Müller und Busmann.

54. Van Dijk, Hans. 1996. *Colonizing the Void: Adriaan Geuze, West 8 Landscape Architects.* Rotterdam: NAi Publishers.

55. Lévesque, Luc. 1999. "Montréal, l'informe urbanité des terrains vagues: Pour une gestion créatrice du mobilier urbain." *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine*, 85 : 47–57.

56. Lang, Peter. 2008. "Stalker Unbounded: Urban Activism and the Terrain vague as Heterotopia by Default." In *Heterotopia and the City: Public Spaces in a Postcivil Society*, edited by Michiel Dehaene and Lieven de Cauter, 215–224. New York: Routledge.

57. Doron, Gil. 2008. "...Those Marvellous Empty Zones on the Edge of Our Cities: Heterotopia and the 'Dead Zone'." In *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society,* edited by Michiel Dehaene and Lieven de Cauter, 203–214. New York: Routledge, 204.

hardly speak of it as waste or undesirable space. But the halt of planning processes does freeze in time and space the found condition and engage the given lot or area into a "continuous present."[58] But freezing, abandoning, or putting aside lots, buildings, or infrastructures does not imply their sanitizing. On the contrary, things are usually left as they are to slowly degrade. The positive side of such operations is that it leaves available these spaces for both spontaneous and durable appropriations to take place, and for digressions to take shape.

The echo of Solà-Morales Rubio resounds in all these variations: if the terrain vague is indeed inside the city and can be argued as a positive presence, bringing diversity within the heterogeneous, it remains nonetheless outside our general representation and perception of the city.[59] It remains as the negative image of the organized and agreed-upon, a visible critique of contemporary processes, and a breach opening toward other, uncertain, and accidental—not to say worrisome—scenarios.

While the terrain vague is most often understood as a singular space or a succession of a few accumulated lots—small pockets of a city that are not directly inhabited for everyday purposes—certain cities hold within their fabric large urban areas that, though inhabited by vibrant communities, can still be understood as abandoned. They are not delimited by the boundaries of a single property, as would be a terrain vague, nor are they slums in the sense of makeshift shelters—though they might be as elaborate in construction. As in the phenomenon of suspension discussed above, these are areas that were abandoned and appropriated by new groups of residents: settling, most often illegally, in existing buildings, with or without access to basic services. They are as if abandoned, while still inhabited. While these areas have an established historical presence, their abandonment suspends not so much their use as their participation in the city's development. Their informal reappropriation inhabits a time and space that is without presence in the perception of the city. In other words, these areas are a form of inhabited terrain vague, or what I propose to call a *vague urbain*.

Engaging the same connotations outlined by Solà-Morales Rubio, the term is no longer limited to a precise, determined lot, but rather seeks to encompass leftover swatches of the city's fabric where property ownership is unclear and informal behaviors form part of everyday occurrences. A paradoxical situation, perhaps: to propose an expression that itself seeks to describe a dimension of the city that defies clear identification. But all the same, when compared to their building or lot-size counterparts, the particularity of these vagues urbains lies in their duplication and complication of the amount and nature of modes of resistance that we usually ascribe to the terrain vague. While the terrain vague can be inhabited sporadically or in parts, the vague urbain thrives with life: it is composed of multiple layers and is animated by constant activity, commerce, education, craftsmanship, and so on. The vague urbain is not an empty lot we look at from a distance, behind the protection of a fence. With our two feet in the middle of it, the vague urbain forces us to accept and think of other ways of understanding how life in the city can be discovered and imagined. There is an apparently irreducible quality to it, a form of resilience emerging through creative practices and, to some extent, playfulness. These areas constitute true in-betweens, not just a simple suspension within the city, and demonstrate resistance through their unique rhythms and context: they appear as the stronghold of the wild, the unplanned and the uncertain, at least to the disciplinary

58. Ibid.

59. Solà-Morales Rubio, *Terrain Vague*, 120.

eye. It is my contention that these large inhabited urban areas, neighborhoods really, do meet the criteria of the vague and constitute, in this sense, a differentiation from and enrichment of the critical contribution of the terrain vague to how we engage, imagine, and pay attention to the city. Because vagues urbains hold genuine collectivities and solidarities, all the while surrounded by a city that ignores them, they shape practices that speak of being in the city without the constraints of the normative. They contain within their streets, shops, balconies, public spaces, appropriations of the city that would be intolerable if one wanted to follow the idea of the ideal city. In a reflection on the construction and development of the city, the observation and comprehension of the vague urbain become particularly pertinent for adopting a critical stance toward the processes that both generate it and yet, in a paradoxical condition, remain external to it. What the vague urbain contributes to our experience of the city is the opportunity to move away from what Lefebvre called abstract space, away from homogeneity and from the elimination of existing differences and peculiarities—to rather be forced to accept and work with difference. As a found object whose strangeness triggers our curiosity, the vague urbain is a found piece of urbanity that holds forgotten, invented, and genuine practices. Discovered, they may contribute to our reading of the city as a whole. It is an opportunity to see that amidst the misfortunes of our cities, it is in fact fortunate that places of different paces, places of a different nature, remain. But whether we speak of them as vagues urbains, terrains vagues, dead zones, wastelands, interstices, or marginal areas, the term chosen counts in fact for very little. It is not so much our ability to name them that is important. Their importance, once recognized, and whether accepted or not, lies in the challenge they pose in the negotiation for harmony, as a counterweight keeping our cities in balance. What is crucial about them is their ability to propose valuable potentials, though often unrecognized or undervalued: imaginative potentials necessary for the regeneration of our cities and their perpetuation in long and healthy lives. It is precisely because their past is no longer valuable and their future uncertain that these areas are so precious: in allowing for an in-between to be inserted in our reading and experience of the city, we can embark on a line of flight (to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's terminology) and think of the vague urbain as a meaningful element of the city's landscape.

In his defense for the terrain vague, Solà-Morales Rubio argued that while our "gaze [of the city] has been constructed and our imagination shaped by photography,...abandoned space...subjugate[s] the eye of the photographer."[60] Solà-Morales Rubio thought that the strangeness of the vague represented a fascinating, changing reality that photography was able to capture so that we could begin to accept the vague within our conception of what a landscape ought to be. But as a landscape is culturally constructed, the assimilation of the vague urbain into our idea of landscape isn't so easily achieved. In fact, the deterioration of the industrial city, while embraced by photography, challenged the very notion of landscape, or as Alain Roger claims, created a crisis of landscape. We don't yet know, says Roger, how to look at industrial buildings, how to look at the powerful landscape of a highway. It is up to us, he adds, to forge a schema of vision that will render the vague aesthetic.[61] Though the recognition of the vague urbain is not a question of aestheticisation—there is nothing pretty or bucolic about it and trying to make it so would be beside the point—efforts have to be made to render its qualities, its

60. Solà-Morales Rubio, *Terrain Vague*, 118.

61. Roger, Alain. 1997. *Court traité du paysage*. Paris: Gallimard, 112.

value and its presence within the city visible as a worthy component of the urban. For the vague urbain to exist in the cultural imagination, it needs to be represented and shown as a valuable scape.

In *L'invention du Paysage*,[62] Anne Cauquelin undertakes a thorough demonstration of the emergence of the notion of landscape in the early Renaissance with the invention of perspective drawing: presenting the landscape as a product of construction. Far from the natural world, a landscape is rather a well-crafted representation of it. It is a conscious viewpoint and arrangement, if not to say a controlled reconstitution of natural characteristics. Cauquelin argues, as does Roger, that the construction of landscape emerged from the window, from a framed viewpoint set in the representation of an interior, looking out onto the country. The frame of the window, while isolating the land in a corner of the painting, offered the necessary autonomy from the depicted scene to transform the land into a landscape—*un pays en paysage*.[63] The presence of the window, says Roger, made possible the invention of landscape. In allowing a distance between the land and the focal scene of the painting, natural elements were no longer used as decorative embellishment. They were thus organized into a coherent ensemble—that is, into a culturally constructed landscape.

From the miniaturization of the land viewed through the window, the newly-found landscape will grow to become its own genre, moving out of the window into grand nature. It will determine, to a very large extent, how we now look at the land(scape). We see and look at fog, says Roger, not because there is fog, but because painters, poets, photographers, have taught us the mysterious charms of such effects. Of course there was fog well before an artist painted it, but no one could really see it. Landscape didn't exist until art invented it, until it was represented.[64] Different styles and techniques accompanied the invention of landscape as means to allow us to see and appreciate this newly found reality. The Claude glass, a small convex, sepia colored mirror set in a case introduced by French painter Claude Lorrain in the 17th century, is probably one of the most celebrated examples of the carefully controlled construction of nature in the picturesque tradition. The purpose of the glass was to frame the nature to be painted or looked at by turning one's back to it. Looking at the mirror, the viewer could find the desired elements and gaze upon them while dismissing the undesired: finding the privileged image without having to look at the actual view. The fisheye effect of the glass and the toned down colors reduced nature to a delicate, aestheticized representation. Acting as did the window before it, though in a much more controlled manner, the glass was a device to dominate the natural world.

But what does the window tell us about the relation between the space of the viewer and the space gazed upon? *The Allegory of Good and Bad Government* by Lorenzetti, painted in Sienna in the 14th century, is a famous and intriguing example through which to answer this question. While the fresco confronts, visually, the effects on the land of a good and of a bad governance, it also clearly demonstrates the reciprocate relation between city and country. It proposes that the land—the landscape—be looked upon from the rear balcony of the Palazzo Pubblico: an enlarged window, really, that is visible from the public space of the city. Françoise Chenet-Faugeras pursues this argument by claiming that not only is the landscape a construction, in fact

62. Cauquelin, Anne. 2013. *L'invention du paysage*. Presses Universitaires de France.

63. Ibid., 73.

64. Ibid., 14.

it emerges from the city itself as a gaze of the citizen unto the land through the window or balcony. It is the city that frames and defines the landscape, that which represents a political and economical territory. The *ban* discussed earlier, a land common to a people and under the jurisdiction of a lord, is where the relation between city and country is most evident as the window meets the land and the gaze on the controlled distance begins to shape. As the landscape became autonomous as a genre, the immediate relation to the city disappeared from the representations—a *dépaysement*, says Chenet-Faugeras, or a deterritorialization as would say Deleuze and Guattari—to be subsumed by the breadth of land which is gazed upon. But even through this detachment, the landscape remained an exterior construction informed by an interior, be it the window, the balcony, or the glass. Without the city, claims Chenet-Faugeras, the landscape could not be. Even without depicting the city, a landscape carries the city in filigree and remains its archetype.[65]

Born from the city, the landscape will return to it in the industrial 19th century through literature, under the denomination of an urban landscape. At a time of drastic urban growth and changes, of growing pollution, noise, and population, the idea of an urban landscape made sense if only to transfer the positive attachment art had generated toward landscape and to carry the hope of a renewed appreciation of the city. As in the *paysage beaudelairien*, the urban landscape becomes "the daily spectacle of the city, seen by the *promeneur* who, without hierarchy, embraces the real, not through the circular and all-encompassing gaze, but through the rhythm of the walk, integrating time within the perception."[66] Chenet-Faugeras pursues her argument in proposing that once back in the city, the landscape is no longer dominated by a longing for the distant, but is rather linked to proximity, details, and the peculiarities that reveal the intimacy of the city.

At the turn of the 20th century, this newly found discourse on the city was realized in the work of the Dadaists, initiating a long line of works related to the practice of the found. Indeed, the Dadaists were able to move from the ideal image of a future city to that of the banal and the actual city, not so much as a group of *flâneurs* but as active participants. Their first meeting point, an abandoned church surrounded by a neglected garden, was representative of places that are part of the familiar yet remain unknown, unused, or ignored. A terrain vague, really. But even without a valid reason to exist, that is without a recognized use, the Dadaists, followed by the Surrealists, the Lettristes International, the Situationists, the Smithsons, Aldo van Eyck, Stalker, and the list goes on, proposed that within the normative city lie territories to be explored, landscapes in which to get lost and in which to feel the sensation of a marvelous real.[67]

Since that initial meeting point of the Dadaists, the urban landscape seems to have led a double life, between the normative representations that build most of our understanding of what a given city is or should be and the

65. Chenet-Faugeras, Françoise. 1994. "L'invention du paysage urbain." *Romantisme* 24, no. 83 : 27–38, 31.

66. "Étant donné l'origine historique du concept, on entendra donc par paysage urbain, le spectacle de la ville au quotidien, vu par le promeneur qui, sans hiérarchiser, prend en charge le réel non plus d'un regard circulaire et englobant dans une volonté de totalisation immédiate, mais au rythme de la marche, en intégrant le temps dans sa perception." Ibid., 34 (author's translation).

67. "La ville surréaliste est un organisme qui produit et cache en son sein des territoires à explorer, des paysages où ressentir sans fin la sensation d'un réel merveilleux." Carreri, Francesco. 2002. *Walkscape : Walking as an Aesthetic Practice.* Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 96 (author's translation).

alternative representations that build most of our experience of that same city. While the notion of landscape still generates a positive connotation to the urban, and perhaps this explains why we tend to refer to the urban landscape as that which is established and proper, the same positive connotation can also migrate toward the left-behind, so that both landscapes can intermingle within the same boundaries. What most differentiates both versions of the landscape, besides the obvious normative/informal opposition, is that while the former is nestled within the fabric, sedentary, the latter is mutable, movable, and is perpetually reinvented. The landscape of the vague urbain is generated by the growth of the sedentary, while remaining detached from it; it is the product of the discarded, yet home to communities; it is talked about as dead, yet remains in constant transformation and finds new areas to establish itself as the city grows. At the mercy of the normative, the landscape of the vague has to remain flexible, resilient, and creative. It is because of this very situation that the landscape of the vague is filled with inventiveness, and it is why this landscape's found situations mark a territory to be explored.

But let us be clear: the recognition of the vague urbain as landscape is not motivated by the pursuit of a romanticized version of the derelict, nor the sublimation of manmade ravages. It is rather an effort to transform our reading of it, from something to dispose of to something that is a necessary part of our cities. Representations of the vague urbain, such as that argued by Solà-Morales Rubio, can allow for the vague to enter our collective representation of the urban landscape and turn our gaze upon it. But as is the case with every landscape, our desire to intervene is great and our efforts to fill in the gaps, grand. The difficulty poses itself thus: either we neglect the vague urbain and leave it to be transformed by major urban renovation, or we accept it as it is, at the risk of placing it under a glass dome, so to speak, keeping ourselves exterior to it, gazing upon it as a spectacle. The challenge really lies in our ability to find ways to both help it and keep it, to learn from it and with it, but mostly to take the time required to *practice* it in order to be able to bear and prolong the lessons learned. Without overwhelming the vague urbain with architecture and other well-intentioned interventions, as Solà-Morales Rubio warned us against, attending to the vague urbain means that we might yet build genuine representations of it, allowing it into our perception of what an urban landscape can include—so that it may participate in our idea of the ideal city.

A magnetic Price

In 1999, shortly after Solà-Morales Rubio's argument on the terrain vague, Manuel de Solà-Morales proposed, in a reflection on the design of cities, that the uses we make of them is what constitutes, for each of us and in particular ways, the experience and perception of the city.[68] If one can learn how to appropriate the city, said Solà-Morales, to transform its uses, than one can transfigure urban fragments in an intelligible and potentially pleasant way. We must see in this pleasure the idea of a "healthy" relation: too often the city is considered through its ills, its symptoms and various discomforts, as if we lived in hypochondriac cities.[69] In an approach that could be qualified as optimistic, Solà-Morales acknowledged in the city a dynamism that the architect must utilize and reinforce, an energy that must stimulate urban space rather than feeding it ready-made solutions:

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68. Solà-Morales, Manuel de. 1999. *Manuel de Sola-Morales: Progettare Citta = Designing Cities*. Milan: Electa.

69. Lévesque, Carole. 2011. *À propos de l'inutile en architecture.* Paris: L'Harmattan, 119.

> I believe that the architect's ideal role in the city is not necessarily the invention of forms or the solution of problems, but the creation of meanings, the clarification of what is obscure and the enrichment of what is muddled. Architectural objects exist not for their own sake, but to form places in which people are able to grasp and appreciate complexity as an aesthetic experience.[70]

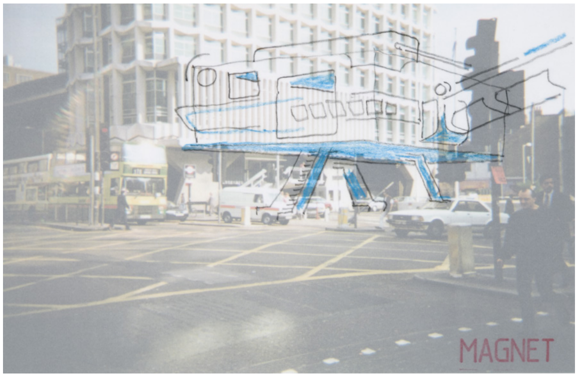
As a means to achieve the enrichment of what is muddled, Solà-Morales suggested urban acupuncture as a strategic intervention on the body of the city. As a medical act, acupuncture is not a remedy but a strategy to stimulate and balance the energy of the body: it is a stimulant to self recovery through which the healing work is in fact produced by the body itself. Thought of as an urban strategy, it is an intervention that pushes the city to react, transforming places and producing chain reactions, hoping that it will eventually act on the city as a whole. If large urban scale projects require equally long processes to be implemented, limiting the immediacies of change, urban acupuncture is animated by the necessity of producing brief and immediate effects through insertions on sensitive points in existing contexts. It also implies that "remedies" do not have to come from projects produced by professionals or governmental bodies. Indeed, the acupuncture strategy supposes that the urban control generally exercised by normative viewpoints can be transferred to those who inhabit the city. Rather than disenfranchising inhabitants with respect to what is deemed worthy (or not) in their environment, or the potential (or lack thereof) of this environment, this strategy increases the possibility of challenging preconceptions in regards to their specific site conditions.

70. Solà-Morales, *Manuel de Sola-Morales*, 53.

Cedric Price's project *Magnet* is certainly an eloquent example of Solà-Morales's proposal. Best known for his *Fun Palace*, which he developed with theatre producer Joan Littlewood in the 1960s, Price was a fervent advocate of choice, self-determination, chance, and of an architecture that would allow the user to be in charge. Though Price built very little through his career, he remains an important figure when debating on the role and essence of self-determination and public space. As such, Fun Palace was to offer responses to several urban and educational issues of the time: in merging leisure and education with cranes and prefabricated modules which would allow an improvised architecture, it was argued that the everyday city dweller could come to the Fun Palace to escape routine and anonymity and embark on an adventure of learning, creativity, and self-fulfillment. Price thought that every citizen should be able to play and learn simultaneously, or as one wishes to, and that the built environment should provide adequate places for such choices to be made. Instead of playing the conventional role of the architect, i.e. to provide permanent forms and symbols, Price thought it better to introduce pleasure in architecture. He thought conventional practice was over-determined and could only have as a resulting effect "the safe solution and the dull practitioner."[71]

While his projects made a broad use of new technologies and many have talked about him as the father of the High-Tech movement, his approach was first and foremost social. Price was interested in technology for what it could bring to a society undergoing change, how it could be used to think of a new type of public space and a new architecture. His desires to transform the perception of architecture through the malleability of spaces and of uses were dominant in his work: "Fun Palace wasn't

71. Price, Cedric. 1984. *Cedric Price: The Square Book*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Academy, 54.



Cedric Price. *Magnet: perspective sketch for Magnet no. 3* (Platform above the plaza at St. Giles' Circus). 1995 or 1996

colour electrostatic print on paper; overlaid with graphite, blue coloured pencil and red ink stamp on translucent paper
21 x 30 cm DR2006:0018:007
Cedric Price fonds. Canadian Centre for Architecture

about technology. It was about people."[72] Even if it is generally the invention, boldness, use of new technologies, and cybernetics that capture our attention when speaking of Cedric Price, it is important to note that his projects were carried by a political agenda and by a strong critique of normative public space. Price's strategy was to prepare, as if they were ready to use, "anti-buildings," bearers of events, pleasure, and appropriation. As such, doubt, delight and change are words often used by Price to describe the necessary qualities for an architecture capable of invention and the transformation of social, economic, and political givens into new pleasures and uses. In proposing situations that preceded norms, Price thought that users of his anticipative machines could also, on their own terms, invent new modes of operation and act on their environment in consequence of them. In this way, instead of proposing buildings that would be fixed and predetermined, he described an architecture that could be defined by others, by users, and that would allow the emergence of novel activities and occupations of the city.

At the time of presenting his Magnet project, twenty years after the proclaimed death of the Fun Palace, Price's intentions and work furthered their relevance within their new urban condition: the leisure society predicted in the 1960s had not quite come to be and the desire for an open public space had certainly been superseded by privatization, regulation, and surveillance. Presented in 1995, at the time of Solà-Morales Rubio's use of the notion terrain vague, and only four years before Solà-Morales's urban acupuncture, Magnet was a proposal that sought to use areas usually uninhabited by the architect. Deployed over ten sites through London and its periphery, small temporary structures linked different sites to allow the safe crossing of roads, to give access to private views or augment the density and use of public space. Price suggested that the work of the architect could change the ways in which the city is used and render visible a defective reality before even giving form to architecture. In an article published in the *Sunday Telegraph* in 1964, Price wrote that the Fun Palace was a social concept in an architectural form;[73] despite the twenty years separating the two projects, he was still looking for ways to propose an alternative to a reality that seemed unchangeable.

72. Price, cited in Mathews, Stanley. 2006. "The Fun Palace as Virtual Architecture: Cedric Price and the practices of indeterminacy." *Journal of Architectural Education* 59, no. 3: 39–48, 47.

73. Price, Cedric. 1964. *Joan's Promised Land*. Sunday Telegraph, July 5. Coupure de presse, Fond d'Archives Cedric Price, Centre Canadien d'Architecture.

The project was shown at the *Architectural Foundation*, where it was described as follows:

> A series of short lived structures, to be funded by local authorities or civic bodies, which would be used to set up new kinds of public amenity and public movement. They would occupy spaces not usually seen as sites available to the public, such as the air space above roads, streets, parks, lakes, and railways...They are designed to "overload" underused or misused sites, to make them more delightful and better fun.Magnets are deliberately mobile, adaptable, and re-usable, so that they do not become, as often happens with buildings, inactive, inflexible, institutionalized, formalized, privatized, or redundant...Magnets are both pragmatic and polemic in the way they turn space to the public advantage. They are not an end in themselves but encourage the continual necessity for change.[74]

The project thus proposed a series of temporary, mobile, aerial, and relocalizable structures. Every architectural element would be borrowed from the construction industry, such as cranes and escalators, so that they would adapt to different conditions by constituting bridges, stairs, promenades, floating docks, mobile places, and library-bridges, in a challenge to determined access and occupation of public spaces, services, and buildings:

> MAGNETS are installed on existing metropolitan sites which are at present underused or misused.
>
> Their SITING enriches the intensity of the city grain.
>
> The STRUCTURES act as both INSERTS AND TRANSPLANTS providing socially beneficial movement routes. Their PLANNING encourages adjacent future growth while the FIXED-LIFE structures enable VARIATION & REASSEMBLY to be undertaken with speed and minimal disruption.
>
> To establish a valid equation between contemporary social aspirations and Architecture, it is essential to add to the latter Doubt, Delight and Change as design criteria.[75]

It is important to note a significant difference between Magnet and other major projects by Price, such as the *Fun Palace*, *Inter-Action Community Centre*, or *Potteries Thinkbelt*. While these proposals were organized by a mega-structure placed on a vacant area, through which punctual elements could then be inserted, Magnet proposed direct interventions in the city and found, within the existent, the necessary support for this new public equipment. Though the scale of the magnets was drastically reduced in comparison to his earlier projects, the ideals of his previous work were still present; as such, they represented a ripe synthesis of Price's position. As he summarized himself, Magnets was to be:

> A device for change, variation & intervention
> A benign social enabler
> An agent for allowing constructive doubt
> A reducer of harm caused by mistakes
> An encourager for society to experiment.[76]

Price often alluded to the fact that architecture could have restricting effects, even being harmful to its users.

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74. Hardingham, Samantha, ed. 2003. *Cedric Price: Opera.* Chichester, West Sussex, Wiley-Academy, 89.

75. Price, Cedric. 1996. Letter, March 15. Fond d'Archives Cedric Price, Centre Canadien d'Architecture.

76. Price, Cedric. 1996. Letter, April 1st. Fonds d'Archives Cedric Price, Centre Canadien d'Architecture.

But he would quickly say that it can also be liberating and can reveal a true sense of being through the discovery of a profound utility and engagement with the places we inhabit.

Price's devices were meant, like the acupuncture proposed by Solà-Morales, to articulate and qualify "punctuations" in the city by generating three main architectural actions: they were thought of as possibilities to link, structurally or spatially, forgotten spaces with the "useful" city; they operated on a temporal dimension, determined by the time required for novel uses to appear, before they could be taken down or moved to a different location; finally, they operated a relational bond as they negotiated unusual connections between their users. The correlation between precisely scaled, temporary devices and punctuation supports the claims made by Price and Solà-Morales, as it supports the revealing of dormant potentials in neglected areas. In a written text, punctuation is an action, i.e. the means by which syntactical relations are established between the various elements of a proposition, and between propositions. To punctuate a sentence, or in the case proposed here, to punctuate the city, is a way to reinforce and to mark given spaces with exclamations. From its etymological derivation, a punctual intervention suggests that it be constituted by a period, that it be focused on a detail, and that it be temporally exact.[77] As a comma, suspension points, interrogation and exclamation marks, quotation marks and parentheses, hyphens, or upper case letters, small-scale devices manipulate, transform, or qualify the meaning of what precedes and follows them—rather than being themselves vehicles for a given semantic. They mark a pause; they imply complicity; they raise the intonation; they exclaim surprise, admiration, or exasperation; they frame, isolate, indicate a change or the beginning of something new. In short, they intervene in our reading of what has been given to us.

Purposefully scaled temporary devices thus have the potential to induce subtle or direct variations in the reading of the city and can therefore be associated with alternative and transgressive practices. The ability of the scaled device to act upon a temporal and spatial specificity, in dialogue with a punctual situation, and the experiments the device proposes (whether through its tectonics, mobility, or interactivity), are two important characteristics that speak of its appropriateness to challenge urban givens and to stimulate the conditions of desire.

In contradiction to expected or normative uses, purposefully scaled devices may appear in themselves useless, even if they can provide, as claimed Price, a profound utility and engagement with their location. But their uselessness only appears as such when considered in opposition to functional and accepted uses or constructions. Henri Lefebvre saw these diverted uses as being meaningful in the sense he referred to as *transfunctionality*, suggesting that uselessness is fundamentally linked to play, and like play, has many purposes while being, simultaneously, not useful at all. Useless devices are purposeful in that they respond to hidden or unspoken needs and desires and accompany otherwise unwanted practices. To set forth the conditions of desire, uselessness must be devious, ingratiate itself with the city, and wedge itself within the existing context. It is not necessary that all become useless, that all be deviant; but purposefully scaled devices challenge the normative in forcing us to face the evidence. And anyway, as does the resilient vague—wether we like it or not—uselessness always finds its way.

77. Lévesque, *À propos de l'inutile en architecture, 6.*

1. Art
2. Laundry
3. Abandoned buildings
4. Empty lots
5. Garbage
6. Kids at play/work
7. Parking spaces
8. Passages
9. Mobile stores
10. Men and plastic chairs
11. Businesses
12. Greenery




Fuck
Off
No
Fear














ديكور
ودهان




CoBRA




SOBHI








MS
JOE


ABOU




BILAL
DVD
FIRAS


VIADO




عش هكذا في


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محلات سليم رزق
جملة ومفرق
ادوات منزلية
PROPERTY



























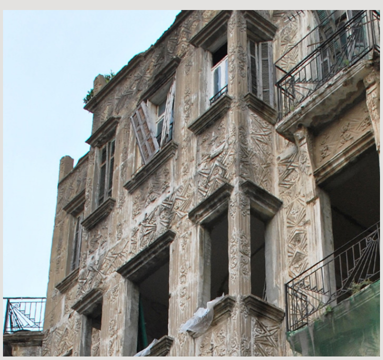














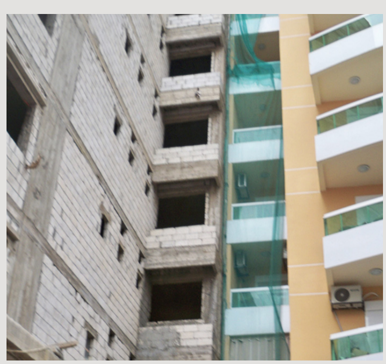


















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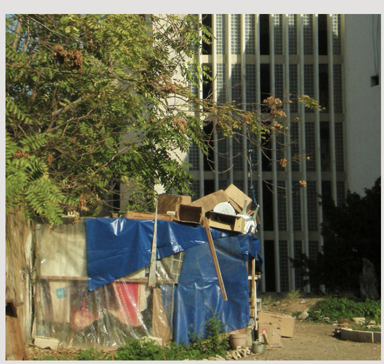







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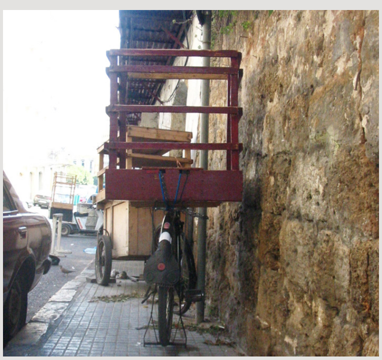



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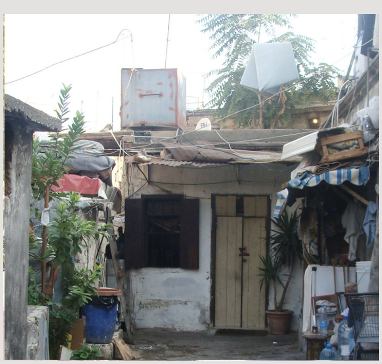


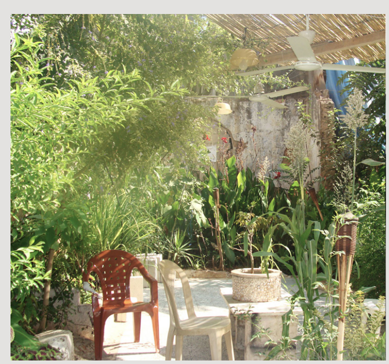























Part 3

To use or to useless: making room for what seemed like nothing

or why tell the city through its little things

A natural phenomenon is an observable thing or event: what is manifest, in itself visible and referring to our lived experience as human beings. It constitutes a primal reality manifested through the mediation of one or several senses. Any occurrence we can see, hear, touch, smell, taste, understand, or traverse is a phenomenon. The use of the term in popular language and experience allows, of course, its demystification, but necessarily brings a trivial sense to it. Since these phenomena take place in determined, familiar contexts, what phenomenologists call the *everyday world*, we tend to not pay attention to them. Experiences come forth and manifest themselves without us acknowledging or understanding their essence: not wondering how they happen to occur, how differently they could take place, or yet, to what larger phenomena they might belong. Our natural attitude is to take for granted the everyday world and to presume that it can only be what it already is: we find ourselves immersed in a world that unfolds automatically before our eyes.

The same goes for the places, people, and events we encounter on a daily basis: beyond the familiar phenomenon, many things occupy our daily activities and yet remain blurred, as if situated beyond our ability to see. Chances are we neglect most of these things, events, and people because they appear as meaningless. Their apparent lack of worth or usefulness in our global experience of the city renders them insignificant to the hurried eye; though likely to warrant a brief glance, they remain unaccounted for in any depth. But, as argued Heidegger, the most useful things are in fact useless. It is when an object is no longer of use, says Heidegger when speaking of Van Gogh's shoes, that we are able to see its usefulness: through "uselessness", the truth about usefulness appears. While usefulness is tangible, calculated, and productive, uselessness refuses to be quantified; it is free of restraint. While the useful is generally understood as that which has an immediate purpose, most likely a technical one—i.e. it allows us to do, to buy, or to exchange something—the useless, that which cannot be merchandised as a commodity, defies our appreciation of our environment by enriching the worth of things deemed unworthy.

In a vibrant manifesto on the usefulness of uselessness, Nuccio Ordine argues, with the help of many great figures of literature and science, that attributing worth only to that which has an immediate applicability is a historically recurring error.[78] Literature, music, poetry, and science, when pursued for the sake of pursuit, free our minds from expected standards to help build a sense of being and a cultural basis upon which to rest. While Ordine develops his argument in support of the humanities and

78. Ordine, Nuccio, Abraham Flexner, Luc Hersant, and Patrick Hersant. 2015. *L'utilité de l'inutile: Manifeste.* Paris: Les Belles lettres.

knowledge devoid of practical pursuit, his case can also be extended to recognize the benefit and enrichment of our experience of the city. Indeed, our going about our daily affairs, walking mechanically ahead toward what it is that we need to do, what Ordine refers to as a wrongful worth, ensures that we remain within a normative reading of what surrounds us. We disregard the countless little things that could participate in our experience, that could perhaps even transform our responses to the norm.

A means to transform the normative was proposed by the Swiss-Cuban author Alejo Carpentier in the introduction to his novel *The Kingdom of this World*. In Carpentier's view, the everyday already harbors occurrences, objects, and relations that can challenge our perceptions of what is considered acceptable—if one is willing to pay attention to them. This *real maravilloso*, or marvelous real, he claimed, reaches beyond our common sense even if found in direct sensible experience—that is, in perceivable events. According to Carpentier, all is a matter of careful examination: for one willing to wait and observe, the unusual will unmistakably emerge amidst the real, so that the most ordinary everyday can compete with the most creative imagination. While Carpentier's proposal might seem to follow closely that of the Surrealists, one major difference keeps them apart. The Surrealist proposal called for an imagination that would supersede realism—a mode of representation that was thought, by the Surrealists, to exclude any exercise of imagination (on the part of the reader) in the worlds depicted through literature and the arts in general. The Surrealist's imagination, the marvelous, was thus to emerge from dreams, from unlikely combinations or inventions. The paintings of Salvador Dali are a remarkable example of this dreamlike imagination, one that transports the viewer into a world that is not rendered up to his or her understanding so much as it is conjured up to further its own creativity. This is where the difference with Carpentier's marvelous real is most evident. For Carpentier, the marvelous is linked to observable reality, to circumstances and history: the marvelous is grounded in the experience of the everyday. As such, the marvelous is realized when an unforeseen alteration of reality happens, a privileged manifestation of the real. Carpentier speaks of an illumination revealing the richness of the unseen—as in, for example, a change in scale through which improbable juxtapositions suddenly emerge as dominant features of the real. So unlike the Surrealists, Carpentier's marvelous emerges from a modification or transformation of the real, not from an imagined world.

The same could be said of the magical real, another variation on the marvelous, but one that embeds elements of magic in the real. While it is true that Carpentier's marvelous real does recognize supernatural elements to be part of reality, it is precisely that which differentiates it from magical realism. Indeed, while the magical is considered a bidimensional world—a magical one that interacts with the real one—the notion of the marvelous suggests that there is only one dimension to the world and that the realm of the oneiric and familiar comingle. While these gradations in meaning can help us try to define with greater clarity the essence of the marvelous real, both terms are often used interchangeably; amongst literary critics, there is no consensus about their distinction. Two characteristics must be retained though. Firstly, in the view of the marvelous real, the fantastic and the extraordinary are simply parts of the everyday, just like the many other varied events that fill our daily experience. Their specificity lies in their hidden nature, one that might only be shown to the observant and creative eye. The second characteristic lies in the "qualities" of the marvelous. As Carpentier explains in the quote below, the marvelous does not need to be beautiful:

> The word "marvelous" has, with time and use, lost its true meaning...Dictionaries tell us the marvelous is something that causes admiration because it is extraordinary, excellent, formidable. And that is joined to the notion that everything marvelous must be beautiful, lovely, pleasant, when really the only thing that should be gleaned from the dictionaries' definition is a reference to the extraordinary. The extraordinary is not necessarily lovely or beautiful. It is neither beautiful nor ugly; rather, it is amazing because it is strange. Everything strange, everything amazing, everything that eludes established norms is marvelous.[79]

In *The Kingdom of this World*, a novel set in French-occupied Haiti, a simple cook becomes the emperor of the island and, believing that the Frenchmen will try to reconquer his newly acquired kingdom, sets out to build a magnificent fortress strong enough to endure a 10 years' siege. And to better resist the anticipated attack, he orders "that the cement be mixed with the blood of hundreds of bulls."[80] Twenty thousand people, men and women, built the fortress atop a 900-meter mountain, for a battle that will never come. This, according to Carpentier, is marvelous. While it may appear as an unlikely, heroic task, the folly of King Henri Christophe was clearly beyond reason; it built a reality that could only be possible by "virtue of a specific history, geography, demography, and politics—not by manifesto";[81] it was thus unlike the Surrealist's proposal. As wild as this episode might seem, it is neither a fabrication nor was it premeditated. The marvelous defended by Carpentier is one that is latent, omnipresent, and always in the commonplace.

The elaboration of scales and improbable juxtapositions are also found in everyday occurrences. Similar to de Certeau's proposal, everyday practices may embed manipulations in a given system or an established order.[82] Tricks can be played, as tropes can be written, both inscribing ruses and displacements within the ordinary, revealing strange, bizarre, or simply unexpected elements that provide an awkwardly real perspective on things. And according to Carpentier, "we have only to reach out our hands to grasp [the marvelous]. [Our everyday environment] presents us with strange occurrences everyday."[83]

As in this passage:

> While his master was being shaved, Ti Noël could gaze his fill at the four wax heads that adorned the counter by the door. The curls of the wigs, opening into a pool of ringlets on the red baize, framed expressionless faces... By an amusing coincidence, in the window of the tripe-shop next door there were calves' heads, skinned and each with a sprig of parsley across the tongue, which possessed the same waxy quality...Only a wooden wall separated the two counters, and it amused Ti Noël to think that alongside the pale calves' heads, heads of white men were served on the same tablecloth. Just as fowl for a banquet are adorned with their feathers, so some experienced, macabre cook might have trimmed the

79. Carpentier, Alejo. 1975/1995. "Baroque and the Marvellous Real." In *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, edited by Parkinson Zamora, Lois, Wendy B. Faris, 89–100. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 101.

80. Carpentier, Alejo. 1957/1949. *The Kingdom of this World*. Translated by Harriet de Onis. New York: The Noonday Press.

81. *Marvelous Real in America,* 75.

82. Certeau, Michel de. 1980/1990. *L'invention du quotidien 1. Arts de faire.* Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 135.

83. Carpentier, *Baroque and the Marvellous Real,* 107.

heads with their best wigs.[84]

Carpentier explores ways in which the marvelous augments the layers of the narrative, creating, with the addition of each exploration, a plausible sense in which every encountered place can hold the seed for the marvelous to grow. As such, following Ti Noël's observations, he begins to see how indeed, "the morning was rampant with heads,"[85] remarking on the various prints hung in front of the bookseller, picturing kings and dignitaries, until he hears the "voice of his master, who emerged from the barber's with heavily powdered cheeks. His face now bore a startling resemblance to the four dull wax faces that stood in a row along the counter, smiling stupidly."[86] The presence of the heads continues as Ti Noël has to carry, across town and into the plantation, a "chill skull under his arm, thinking how much it probably resembled the bald head of his master hidden beneath his wig."[87] By insisting on the interchangeability between two- or three-dimensional, printed or powdered, bewigged or dressed with parsley, animal or human, upon a body or a shelf or under an arm—heads become no longer the essential part of a complete being that one carries at the upper extremity of one's body, but rather an apparatus that is, at most, decorative and interchangeable.

Carpentier proposes that there is no separation between everyday banalities and the wonders of an imaginary world; quite to the contrary, he shows that reality can itself be marvelous. That is, marvelous in the sense of being unexpected, meaningful, and imaginative, more than reflecting a simple naïve happiness. Throughout the narrative Carpentier embeds the marvelous in different ways so that our imagination might transcend the expected daily life of a colony, creating a plausible sense of reality. For instance, the following passage plays on sensorial experiences in which an imminent violence is intertwined with both nature's protective serenity and its potential uprising in support of revolution, where the natural sea shells dispersed through the landscape become the tools of the uprising, and where delicate purple flowers become a protective bunker:

> From far off came the sound of a conch-shell trumpet. What was strange was that the slow bellow was answered by others in the hills and the forests. And others floated in from farther off by the sea, from the direction of the farms of Milot it was as though all the shell trumpets of the coast, all the Indian lambis, all the purple conchs that served as doorstops, all the shells that lag alone and petrified at the summits of the hills, had begun to sing in chorus...
> M. Lenormand de Mézy, frightened, hid behind a chump of bougainvillea.[88]

In a delicate oscillation between the marvelous and the real, Carpentier crafts throughout the novel exchanges between natural elements, organs, functions, colors and sentiments, embedding resonances between seemingly unrelated objects, events, or beliefs. For example, while a mysterious poison spreads over the colony, killing animals and white masters, Ti Noël rejoices at the coming uprising of the long awaited king-warrior, and in his imagining of the coming events, weaves a known reality with one in which exchanges blur the limits of reality, the boundaries at which it begins to transform:

84. Carpentier, *The Kingdom of this World,* 10–11.

85. Ibid., 11.

86. Ibid., 15.

87. Ibid.

88. Ibid., 72-73.

> In that great hour—said Ti Noël—the blood of the Whites would run into the brooks, and the loas, drunk with joy, would bury their faces in it and drink until their lungs were full.[89]

Through repetition of such motifs, Carpentier generates a growing belief that what might have seemed absurd or unreal is in fact everywhere around us, and that through the attentive observation of its recurrence, the marvelous is integrated into our experience of reality. As Carpentier relates the dramatic end of the colony and the eventual enslavement of Haitians by their new king, the marvelous real gains its *raison d'être*: one builds a vision of an everyday reality that encompasses the marvelous. He trains the eye to be alert for the marvelous ordinariness that enriches what we are most often willing to consider to be worthy of attention.

While finding the marvelous requires a genuine openness to events at hand, it also asks that we be willing to make what we find part of the building of our "valuable" world. Michel de Certeau's proposal in *L'invention du quotidien* supposes that the acceptance and inclusion of everyday occurrences, be they normative or marvelous, into one's experience is epitomized by the practice of the street. As such, de Certeau claims that practice invents the everyday as a lived experience. To practice the street implies an active participation—a performance, really—that seeks to relate to details and events in order to build a direct contact with the immediate environment, as an *art de faire*. Because practicing is a kind of thinking, says de Certeau, it is an operative and efficient knowledge of the everyday, one that exists through what is already there: a reuse, or new-use, of the available. With improvisation, inventiveness, or *braconnage*, as de Certeau likes to put it, we can invent our everyday in ways that may resemble Carpentier's, and discover underlying facets of reality otherwise left in the shadows.

The practice of the street implies, beyond an active participation and appreciation, that struggles, conflicts, contradictions, and all marvelous aspects be incorporated in the knowledge of a given city and its ways of operating. Things that may appear as inconsequential can be embedded creatively so that the practitioner is able to work with them—as opposed to working around them or, worse, to simply brushing them out of the way. To a certain extent, it might not even matter where the working-with will eventually lead, as long as it leads forward, toward alternative readings, perceptions, and practices of the city.

The marvelous and practice both suggest that the everyday be thought of as a lived experience, one that happens in phenomenological time and is lived as direct experience. Paul Ricoeur explains this phenomenological time as a time told, *raconté*, which can be considered a form of practice. Like practice, it is likely to have a variable constitution, as opposed to a linear historical time.[90] In the eyes of Ricoeur, time is always plural; the present holds past, present, and future tenses in what we can imagine as a "thick present." Rather than thinking of a chronological order, Ricoeur's time is a triple present: a present of things future, a present of things past, and a present of things present. Present of the future? asks Ricoeur: from now on, i.e. starting now, I commit myself to do such a thing tomorrow. Present of the past? he asks again: I have now the intention of doing this because I just thought that... Present of the present? he asks finally: Now I am doing this because now I have the time for

89. Ibid., 42.

90. Ricoeur, Paul. 1985. *Temps et récit, tome III: Le temps raconté.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

it.[91] While the capacity to act—"now I am doing this"—is what constitutes the present of the present, it invariably contains the initial thought that produced the action and the expectancy of an outcome. Thus everyday practice becomes a mediator between the three constituents of the present time, allowing a dynamic interaction between them. And it is through this most elementary articulation of the present that practice induces stories.[92]

In the eyes of Ricoeur, stories, or what he calls *mise en intrigue*, can free perceptions from normative and apparently unshakeable givens. In a tripartite process, as that of the thick present, the central position, that of configuration, plays a most important role in linking past and future to shape new cultural elements. The configuration of things already known leads to a multifaceted reading of the familiar, and, in the case at hand, of our cities. It allows for multiple readings to participate in challenging our preconceptions of how cities need to be looked upon and practiced.

The process begins with a pre-understanding of the world that surrounds us, what Ricoeur calls *prefiguration*. He suggests that the "composition of the plot is grounded in a pre-understanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources and its temporal character."[93] In other words, the narrative, or the everyday, is practiced well before it is written. Prefigurative elements are the available material one disposes of to comprehend stories: familiar things, events, and places that allow us to approach narratives with a certain pre-understanding of what will constitute the intrigue. While we do experience these events and places in the present time, that is, the present of the present, they also belong to the past as they portray the cultural memory of a given community which, in return, enables us to claim a pre-understanding of things that surround us.

The second part of Ricoeur's model belongs to the realm of action, the present of the present. Configuration, the central and most decisive part of his model, is what mediates between singular events and the narrative as a whole, giving shape to and connecting disparate elements, circumstances, means. and interactions. The role of this emplotment is to hold together the various parts into a meaningful story: it is a "temporal synthesis of the heterogeneous, [an] attempt to clarify the inextricable [and to] confront several stories against, before or after each other."[94] Ricoeur speaks of it in terms of a braid that ties together events with their ways of creating actions, their causes and reasons for acting, crossed by elements of fortuity, coincidences. and simple chance.[95] The configuring act can bring closer together overlooked, unknown, surprising, or marvelous elements within the realm of the normative, allowing the latter to transform. While configuration belongs to the realm of action (as it ties together various elements, objects, practices. and everyday events), it is also built and conceived as an imperfect knowledge, incomplete and perhaps even clumsy, that slowly moves forward toward an eventual completion and objective. Thus, as in the present of the present, configuration is the mediator between things readily available and those becoming. The craft of configuration advances toward future narratives and outcomes while remaining grounded in the real.

91. Ricoeur, Paul. 1983. *Temps et récit, tome 1: L'Intrigue et le récit historique*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 119.

92. Ibid.

93. Ibid., 54.

94. Ricoeur, Paul. 1998. "Architecture et narrativité." *La revue Urbanisme* (Nov.-Dec): 44–51, 50.

95. Ibid., 49.

The process of configuring comes to fruition in the third and final part of Ricoeur's model, a reconfiguration of the temporal and spatial experience. Reconfiguration is what marks the intersection of the text with the reader, where the land of interpretation opens up. The story, constituted from a novel configuration of existing practices and cultural symbols, comes to life in the consciousness of the reader/practitioner, out of the literary world, and into the realm of the everyday. The configuration thus contributes, once it comes in contact with the reader/practitioner, to the enunciation of possible inhabitations and engagements with the physical world: a reconfiguration of what things ought to be and a re-reading of our built environment.[96]

Between the configuration and the marvelous real, we can begin to see how indeed the practice of the street may very well collect and tie together the bizarreness of certain places, the unexpected organization of a given area, or the incongruent information given by strangers into a narrative embedding the marvelous and the normative in ways that may transform how we apprehend and think about our everyday.

96. As a matter of fact, Ricoeur did publish a short essay, *Architecture and Narrative,* in which he pulls his theory of emplotment out of literature to extend it toward architecture and cities. In his argument, the prefigurative stage is linked to the general built environment because every "lived history" happens within "lived spaces": everyday events mark and affect spatial organizations. The configuration, which consists of a temporal synthesis of the heterogeneous, finds its architectural correspondence in a spatial synthesis of the heterogeneous. To build necessitates bringing together know-hows, context, users, history, and so on, into a cohesive, yet ever changing, built form. The last part of the model, reconfiguration, finds its equivalent in architecture as a retaliation to building, an active inhabitation that implies an attentive re-reading and continuous re-learning of the built environment. Ricoeur, "Architecture et narrativité."

Events, people, and places in ordinary life will strike the practitioner as stories waiting to be told, as what might have first appeared as useless episodes crystallize and pass into collective consciousness. Ricoeur insists that the ways we understand each other in daily life involve an irreducible *storification*, narratives that take shape in the immediacy of the present through the banalities of our everyday environment. The implication of the everyday in the shaping of narratives is that instead of things happening one after the other, as would be the case in a well-planned and foreseen storyline (or urban development for that matter), they happen one because of the other, entangled in practice. It is through this organic emplotment that past, present, and future are linked, or as argued earlier, that tradition and utopia find a common ground: an active and practiced present. It is precisely because of the present's ability to mediate that it is in the present that things worthy of attention are found; it is here that things that may be regarded as insignificant can be key to possible and different narratives.

As shown in the historical fiction of Carpentier, the entanglement of historical facts (or prefigurative elements of the real) with marvelous real elements of the present (or that which seemed as of no consequence) influences our original understanding and changes our perspective on additional layers of the real that might not have been suspected without the narrative. Ricoeur explains in *The Narrative Function* that "to narrate and to follow a story is already to 'reflect upon' events" and "the notion of reflective judgment upon events includes the concept of 'point of view'."[97] In other words, to tell the city through

97. Ricoeur, Paul. 1981. "The Narrative Function", In *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation,* edited and translated by John B. Thompson, 274–296. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 279.

its normative, expected, and agreed upon chronological time and events can only tell us the story of a city from the perspective of the dominant discourse; to tell the city through its details, as insignificant as they might appear to be, reflects upon the story of the normative through the point of view of those who practice the city. In this sort of augmented narrative, layers of the thick present build up to change our perspective and to make us admit the possibility that useless details can in fact turn out to be quite useful when truly considering the places we inhabit.

Details: Architectural drawings and other stories

Details in architecture are one of the most difficult elements to master. Taught in general terms in university, it is only through practice, experimentation, and close collaboration with the building process that the art of details can be developed. Often presented as tectonics, the role of the detail—besides ensuring a sturdy and tempered envelope, which occupies most of our efforts in teaching details—is to bring the construction of architecture forward to speak of its construing. As claimed Marco Frascari, "details are much more than subordinate elements; they can be regarded as the minimal units of signification in architectural production and meanings."[98] Details, he asserted, express the process of signification in that they are, or can be, generators of meaning—a role generally ascribed to the plan, and sometimes to the section, as they are the two main elements in the architectural production that convey spatial qualities. While most of our experience of architecture is first rendered through these qualities, or through the *promenade architecturale*, to borrow the words of Le Corbusier, we often neglect to recognize that details carry an important and decisive effect on the appreciation of our experience. Though we often neglect to pay attention to details, as we are more interested in the deployment of space and perhaps also because good details are often traded off for sound budgets, meaningful details still make their way through contemporary architecture. For instance, the charred concrete of Bruder Klaus Field chapel of Peter Zumthor, delicately punctured with copper-covered pinholes to create a star-like natural light; the crafted layering of tiles and stones of the Ningbo History Museum by Wang Shu, carefully assembled to render a historical texture; or, at the opposite extent of the spectrum, the effacement of details as in the Corning Museum of Glass north wing expansion by Thomas Phifer, where a carefully crafted assembly creates a glass-like light, white and seamless; these are but a few examples of details that, beyond the spatial prowess of the respective buildings, play a decisive part in the overall quality of the experience.

In *Le Corbusier in Detail*, Flora Samuel reflects on such details in Corbusier's promenade:

> Le Corbusier was always keen to emphasize the fact that his architecture was built around a series of unfolding views, encompassing and celebrating the movements of the body. Just as a film director creates a feeling of suspense, or a writer draws out the end of a book in order to render the conclusion all the more satisfying, the architect can choreograph a route to create maximum drama. In these cases it is the small details that are of the utmost importance in contributing to the sense of anticipation.[99]

98. Frascari, Marco. 1984/1996. "The Tell-the-Tale Detail." In *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture, an Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995,* edited by Kate Nesbitt, 498–513. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 500.

99. Samuel, Flora. 2007. *Le Corbusier in Detail.* New York: Routeledge, 127.

The articulation of details thus enriches and defines the spatial experience. Rather than mere anecdotes or vanities, details are an intrinsic part of architectural experience as a whole. The examples given by Samuel, particularly in regard to the treatment of doors—the large pivoting door to let the space flow in and out, the encased handle which lets the eye think the door is a wall and the hand think it can reach through, or the small door cut within the wall which demands a physical effort to move across in exchange for the space it offers—lead us to believe that details are in fact a priority in devising a promenade. The role of the detail is that of a device, or a joint, as Frascari would say, that is, it has the power to operate an action upon the grander narrative in order to influence and divert it toward its desired effect.

Strongly influenced by the Italian Renaissance and concerned with architectural representation, the senses, and narrative throughout his career, Frascari discussed in *The Tell-the-Tale Detail*, an influential essay published in 1984, the art of detailing as the locus for innovation and invention of both the construction and the construing of architecture. It is through details, he says, "that architects can give harmony to the most uncommon and difficult or disorderly environment generated by culture."[100] Joining materials, elements, and components, details play an essential role in ordering not only how the building is put together but also how one enters, how one sits by the window, how spaces sound and feel. Thus beyond the tectonic joint, i.e. the skillful art of joining materials in ways that convey meaning, details join architecture to its occupants, join a building to its environment, and join the experience of space to the stories we tell about a city. Expressing both the reality of construction and the imagination of new possibilities, details join and reconfigure the places we inhabit on a daily basis.

The question of scale thus becomes irrelevant. As Frascari points out, "a column is a detail as well as it is a larger whole, and a whole classical round temple is sometimes a detail when it is a lantern on top of a dome."[101] The vestibules of Frank Lloyd Wright play that exact role: finely detailed in their construction, the tight space covered in wood and stone acts as a transition, a detail, from the outdoor to a tall ceiling living room; or the thick windows of Louis Khan at the Exeter Library, where a number of layers from concrete to glass to wood generate an individual room for the reader within the larger open space of the library. While dictionaries define details as being minor decorative features of a building or of a work of art, Frascari argues that architectural details are rather defined by their capacity to join and connect: to join physically and narratively. Details, which might appear as secondary, as insignificant aspects that can easily be overseen, become central elements in the definition of experience and meaning, in the "meeting of the mental construing and of the actual construction."[102]

The role of drawing in understanding details was central to the study of architecture in the Beaux-Arts tradition, as Frascari reminds us. While we now draw shop drawings to communicate complete information about what needs to be built and how, architects didn't always have to detail their details. Relying on master builders and craftsmen, there was a direct relation between the building (the plot) and the detail (the tale), while the tradesmen "were able to construct the drawing with the exact eye of the artist."[103] That is to say that the drawing submitted to the

100. Frascari, *The Tell-the-Tale Detail.* 501.

101. Ibid.

102. Ibid., 503.

103. Ibid., 502.

master builder from the architect carried the idea of the detail rather than its precise dimensions. It is no wonder that Jacques-François Blondel included the study of stereotomy in his school of architecture. As the architect, for Blondel, should be knowledgeable of the trades required for the construction of his buildings, so should he be able to draw properly the elements to be built. By "properly," Blondel meant that drawing was the most essential know-how of an architect: he should be able to draw an accurate representation of the detail to be built, but most importantly he should be able to draw the intention and idea of his design—*dessiner à dessein*. While *dessin* and *dessein* are now two distinct words, the former meaning a drawing, the latter an intention, the 18th century *dessein* was used for both, so that the drawing of the architect necessarily contained an idea. Obviously this could not have been an easily acquired skill, and so in a lecture given in 1747, entitled *Discours sur la manière d'étudier l'architecture, et les arts relatifs à celui de bastir*,[104] Blondel explained how *dessein* would be taught every day, 12 hours a day so that when students were not busy with other studies, they would have to draw.

Through this particular insistence on drawing was developed the graphic survey of existing buildings known as the *analytique*. Frascari explains how *analytiques* were "composed in different scales in the attempt to single out the dialogue among the parts in the making of the text of the (studied) building."[105] Drawings were assembled at various scales onto a single sheet of paper and sometimes included the drawing of the entire building façade, usually drawn at a very small scale so that the building appeared as "a detail among details."[106] Independently of their scale, details were thus studied to train the hand along with the mind and to learn the ideas embedded within the construction, dismantling the building in parts, changing the scales of the parts and reorganizing them in a composition. The drawing was considered an instrument to stimulate thought, critical assessment, and the craft of narrative, as much as an instrument of learning the construction process.

A contemporary rendition of the *analytique* can be read into the work of Melvin Charney. Trained as an architect and turned to the arts, Charney's work is an intricate balance between reality and interpretation, between observation and extrapolation of meaning, between criticism and desire. Concerned with the space of the city and of its everyday manifestations, Charney saw in the urban landscape a hearth of knowledge. According to Phyllis Lambert, he understood it as an encyclopedia where architecture becomes a metaphorical representation of human being. His work, she continues, is a meticulous work of exploration, associating diverse elements, disparate factors, and heterogeneous objects: a work dedicated to revealing hidden truths.[107]

While several of his works could be talked about in terms of *analytique*, two of his early studies in particular evoke a process of dismemberment in order to better comprehend the formative and narrative elements that constitute the acts and consequences of building, living, and abandoning. They also help build a foundation for understanding his later work.

104. Blondel, J.-François. 1747. *Discours sur la manière d'étudier l'architecture, et les arts relatifs à celui de bastir. Paris: P.J. Marinette, 3.*

105. Ibid.

106. Ibid.

107. Lambert, Phyllis. 1991. *Paraboles et autres allégories: l'œuvre de Melvin Charney 1975–1990.* Montréal: Centre Canadien d'Architecture, 14.

Une Histoire…Le trésor de Trois-Rivières, a work completed in 1975, is a compelling documentation and story of a worker's house linking the cultural history of a community to details of classical architecture. Charney explains, in a catalogue published for the exhibition *Melvin Charney: Œuvres 1970–1979*, presented at the Museum of Contemporary Arts (MAC) in Montreal in 1979, that he started this work by studying buildings dating back to the beginning of industrialization in Quebec. He collected photographs, post cards, maps, newspaper clips, all sorts of images that pictured everyday buildings, from churches to shops, factories and houses. He paid particular attention to the birth of the urban architecture growing from the incoming population to industrialized cities, as was the case in Trois-Rivières, a small city halfway between Montreal and Quebec city, located at the confluence of the St–Maurice and St–Lawrence rivers. While Charney had mostly been preoccupied with the architecture of Montreal, Trois-Rivières had also been a city with exponential growth, and in this case, almost exclusively due to its industrialization. At the turn of the 19th century, the lucrative wood industry developed, taking advantage of the hinterland and the rivers bordering the city, along which several sawmills were built and eventually the first paper mills. The industry flourished and in 1926, Canada became the world leader in the paper industry and Trois-Rivières the world capital of paper production, being home to the largest paper mill in the world. The fast growing population, coming from rural areas, and most of them working at producing paper, had to invent a new urban context in the vicinity of the mills, one that must have been quite foreign to them. Adapting the constructions they were familiar with to the denser situation, the first industrialized construction materials—mainly standardized wood lumber—became common for building houses and shops. This meant that instead of building with solid wood as they were used to—with *pièces-sur-pièces* houses in which large pieces of wood, three inches by twelve inches or there about, stacked on edge to serve both as structure and insulation—houses were now built with balloon frames. These involved a much lighter construction method with correspondingly light insulation as the new empty walls were stuffed with sawdust or newspaper.

Among the collected photographs, a small house near the mill stood out. The house was part of an area where urban renewal was imminent when Charney was examining the photograph, and he described it as having a poignant presence. Its volume, he said, evoked the geometry of a classical temple; its façade, larger than the house itself, was added on as if a baroque fronton, while the window and doorframes inscribed a cross.[108] While the house still stands,[109] Charney believed it would soon be demolished and saw in this process a violent act of politically motivated destruction. He sought to capture its meaning through drawings and a reconstruction of

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108. Charney, Melvin. 1979. *Melvin Charney: Œuvres 1970–1979.* Montréal: Musée d'art contemporain, 33.

109. In a catalog published in 1979, Charney explains how he went to visit the house to find out that it had been demolished in the midst of the urban renewal/demolition process. "*Afin de mieux comprendre cette maison, je m'y suis rendu pour me rendre compte qu'elle avait été démolie en 1974, emportée par un programme de rénovation urbaine.*" *(Charney, Melvin Charney: Œuvres 1970–1979,* 32) In a later catalogue, published in 1991, Charney describes the house as being part of an area which was clearly destined for large-scale demolition. He claims to have gone to see the house, to have measured it and photographed it. "*Afin de mieux comprendre cette maison, j'ai voulu la voir. Je l'ai mesurée, photographiée.*" (Lambert. *Paraboles et autres allégories,* 58). In Louis Martin's *On Architecture, Melvin Charney, a Critical Anthology,* Martin notes that the house was not demolished, as shows the above photograph. (Martin, Louis ed. 2014. *On Architecture, Melvin Charney, a Critical Anthology.* Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 299).



House on Ste-Geneviève Street, 2015, © C.Lévesque.



Melvin Charney. *A History, the Treasure of Trois-Rivières.* 1975

Colored pencil and wax crayon over photostat on wove paper, 40,5X62cm
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
© Estate of Melvin Charney / SODRAC (2018)

its exterior features. The MAC installation built a sort of effigy, "ritualized the figuration that gave [the house] meaning, [showing] architecture to be part of an ever-developing discourse closer to the language and understanding of people than our cultural institutions would have it."[110] The work shown in the exhibition "presented collective values built in our surroundings."[111]

The process of surveying the house shows the same attention that would be paid to a temple, using the same language and technique to the extent of eventually blurring the elements of both: whether the descriptive sketches belong to one or another becomes irrelevant as the house becomes a monument, the monument a house. But my attention goes to a color rendering over a photocopy of the original photograph. It shows the neighbouring houses in sepia color, as if they belonged to an accurate past, one that can be dated and remembered, and leaves the women and children walking past the houses in black and white, as if standing outside the identifiable time. The house itself is rendered in color pencil, an even brown with what now seems a blue metal roof. Manipulating the photocopy further, the sidewalk appears to be cut at the entrance of the house, acting more as an access bridge than as a continuous and nondescript ground surface. The remaining ground disappears under an etching-like gray rendering to leave the house standing on posts, themselves poised on distant anchor points. The house colors disappear toward the edge of the image to abstract it from its context and to turn it into the relic of a monument.

Though the technique is quite simple, this early drawing by Charney anchors his work in a study of the everyday. It shows the quotidian as something worthy of attention and as something that shares proportions, materiality and history with other types of construction that might

110. Melvin Charney, in Martin, *On Architecture,* 300.

111. Ibid., 301.

appear to history as more momentous. The small house captures the collective memory of a city built for industry, the struggle and precariousness of its inhabitants living in paper thin houses while working in a gigantic and sturdy paper mill. The drawing of Charney thus speaks of the house as a temple, built for the ages. Its theatrical presence and temporality reveal the fragility of the structure all the while evoking an everyday that has been snatched away and a future that is anchored in the past.

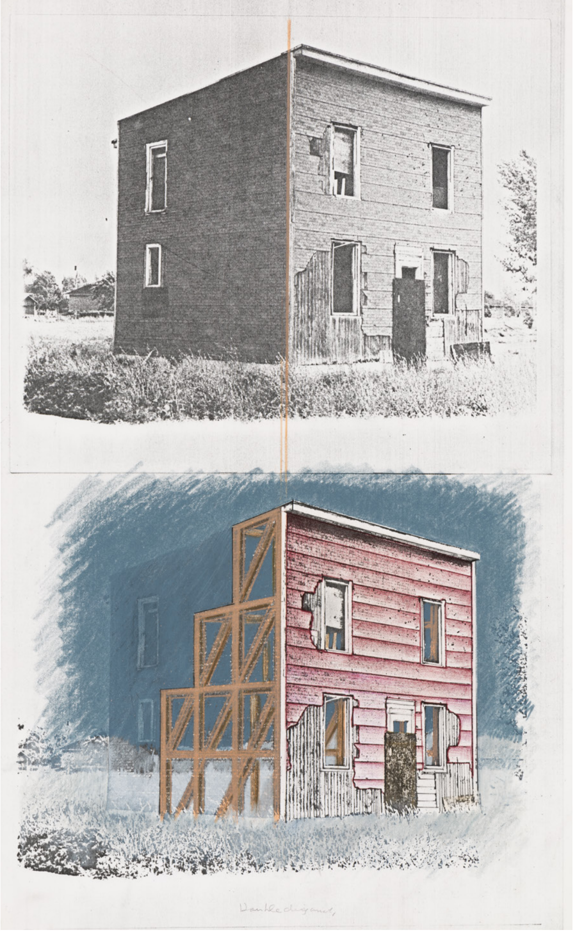
In *Fragments*, a study completed between 1975 and 1978, Charney gathered yet more photographs of abandoned vernacular buildings, all taken between 1890 and 1940, at the highest years of industrialization in Quebec. As in the house of Trois-Rivières, the collected images exposed both the remnants of construction as emptied presence and the figurative stories that once inhabited the structures. Charney transformed these images to free the forms—the details—of the buildings, manipulating, cutting, blurring or repeating the images or sections of the images so as to reshape these photographs into projective constructions meant to bring into the present time the constitutive details of everyday buildings. Pursuing the dismemberment of the elements, the drawings produced by Charney begin to erase the superfluous materials to concentrate on the "worthy" details while keeping just enough traces of the discarded to retain a sense of context. His drawing *La maison de Rivière-des-Prairies*, drawn in 1977 again over the photocopy of a photograph, pictures the façade of a farmhouse as a paper-thin surface supported by timber-frame scaffoldings, the rest of the house blurred under a blue veil of colored pencil. The apparent weight of the scaffolding renders the façade, that which should protect its inhabitant, frail and obsolete; it also fills the space that should be occupied by the private interior with solid pieces of the wood that once built these houses. In effect, it reverses the façade,



Melvin Charney. *The Rivières-des-Prairies House, Robert Street.* 1975

gelatin silver print 23 x 34.1 cm PH2002:0014
Canadian Centre for Architecture
Acquired with the generous support of Nicholas Olsberg and the Canada Council for the Arts © Estate of Melvin Charney

turning the exterior into the interior, toward what we imagine as being the front road, as would a theater set. The blue veil, masking the side of the house, leaves just enough transparency for the hidden façade to maintain a phantom-like presence in the drawing. As white marks are added over the lower portion of the hidden façade, the perspective line is erased to move up with the horizon, blurred underneath the blue veil. The depth of the original photograph is thus augmented: it pushes the side façade to an abysmal depth, far removed from the front façade and scaffolding. This is where the veil gets slightly more complex: moving from over the far-removed side façade to just underneath the front façade, it begins to act as a scrim, as a layer meant to reinforce the protecting surface of the façade. Moving in and out of the house, through the scaffolding and over the horizon



Melvin Charney. *Fragments [I]: Rivière-des-Prairies House*. 1975-1978

reprographic copy with coloured pencil 43.1 x 27.9 cm
DR2012:0012:080:003:001
Melvin Charney fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture
Gift of Dara Charney © Estate of Melvin Charney

line, the blue scrim that might have appeared to simply serve a function—hiding the side façade to draw in the scaffolding—tells the story of a lost past, of present remnants and of a desire to withhold details in the changing context.

In a critical contextualization of the work of Charney, George Adamczyk explains that this early work consisted of a "search for 'significant fragments' in ordinary architecture",[112] where fragments were considered as a kind of "totality, as if the fragment [could] act as the whole architecture."[113] In the eye of Charney, continues Adamczyk, fragments, or details, "translate the profound meaning of building and dwelling,"[114] and can thus act, as Frascari claimed about details, as the smallest unit of meaning, or perhaps, as elements that can build our experience and knowledge of architecture and cities. In that regard, drawing over photocopies of old photographs, "as in radiography,"[115] says Louis Martin, is telling. It demonstrates how Charney, though interested in memory, did not consider these abandoned buildings as memorabilia, but rather as significant fragments that are very much part of the constant process of construction and reconstruction of the city. Frail workers' houses, their emptied walls and humble proportions, emerge as significant elements in our imagination of what constitutes the culture of a people and in our imagination of what the present holds in its grasp: both a prefiguration of our environment (embedded in the past) and the foreseeability of a future that might accommodate such details.

112. Adamczyk, Georges. 2015. "Displacements and Fragments in the Work of Melvin Charney." In *On Architecture, Melvin Charney, a Critical Anthology,* edited by Louis Martin, 17–27, 19.

113. Ibid.

114. Ibid.

115. Martin, *On Architecture,* 229.

Les maisons de la rue Sherbrooke brought these fragmentary drawing explorations into the city as part of a collection of artistic interventions for Montreal's Olympic games in 1976. Just like the drawings, two thin façades of plywood held by intricate scaffolding replicated each other on a site where similar buildings had once stood. Playing with the ambiguity of time, between the remembrance of a historical continuity and an active critical presence in a period where *tabula rasa* was frequently deployed, Charney built the houses as the timely meeting of ruins and the first stages of a new construction. The temporary, fragmentary building proposed that new urban practices should acknowledge and make use of the historical city to bridge between past and future.

As do these examples and much of the later production of Charney, the representation of architecture no longer belongs to the realm of use and shelter. It is rather meant to expose, to display, and to question the perception of our cities and of the spaces we inhabit. Without telling an overt or explicit story of the places he depicts, Charney's drawings and constructions encapsulate significant moments from the past as much as the future. As he renders them present, we recognize fragments of architecture and life with which we might be familiar, but which we have never really seen before. Through the banalities of the everyday—the shared commonalities of our built environment—Charney's work steps outside of a linear narrative, and allows multiple times and storylines to entangle.



Melvin Charney. *Les maisons de la rue Sherbrooke*. 1976
Photo by Gabor Szilasi

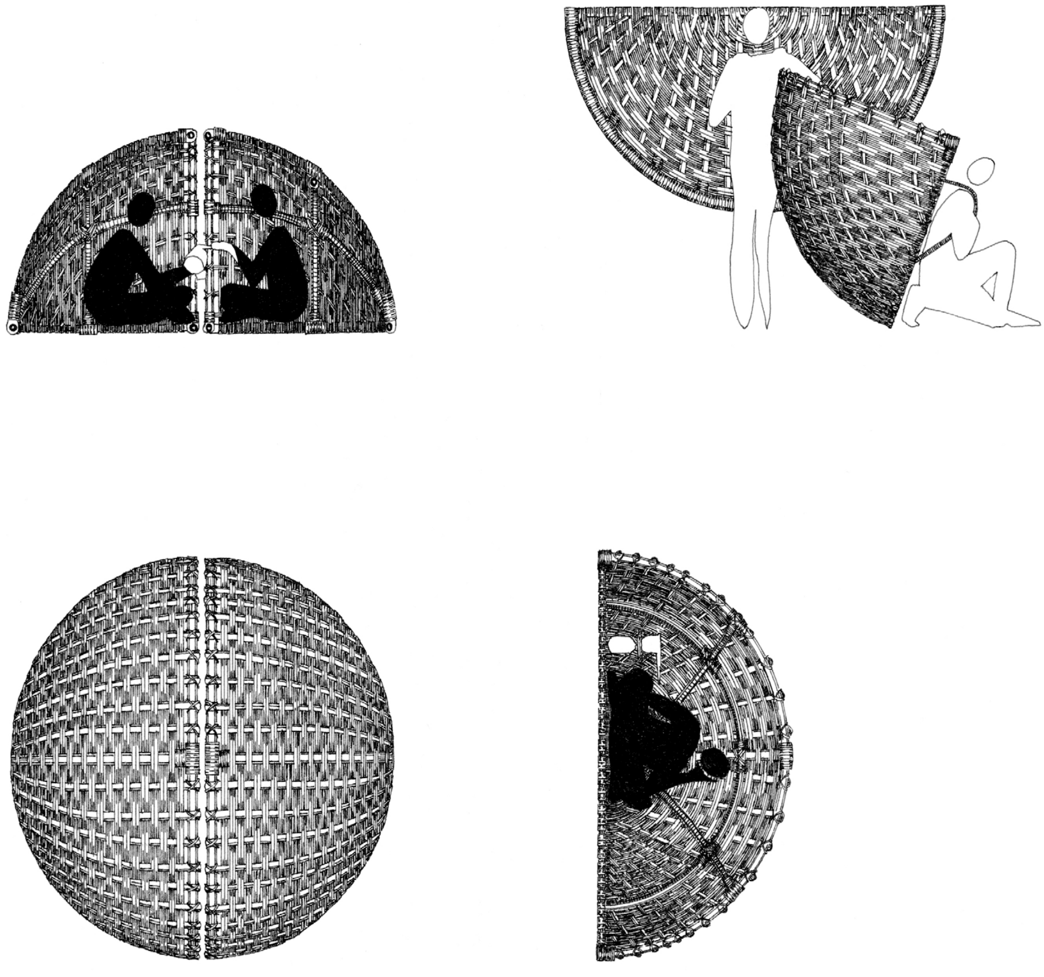
gelatin silver print 35.4 x 27.9 cm DR2007:0086:003:008
Melvin Charney fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture
Gift of Melvin Charney

following pages:
Carole Lévesque. *Five rooms*. 2012

ink on paper 45 x 60 cm

المرأة المسنّة تبتسم لي.
أنا لا أفهم ما عساها تبادرني به،
لكن من الواضح أنها سعيدة لاهتمامي بمنزلها.
هي تسكن فِي زقاق ضيّق، متفرّع من شارع سوق مزدحم
يمتدّ صعوداً على منحدر خفيف يؤدّي إلى مجمّع بيوت صغيرة.
بيتها رواق صغير المساحة غير أنه مضياف:
فتحة بسيطة تمتدّ على طول جدار من باطون،
تزيّنها من كلّ جانب ثلاث نباتات في آنية فخّاريّة.
في أرجائه، حبلا غسيل منصوبان الواحد فوق الآخر،
تنشر عليهما غسلة الصباح وفساتينها القاتمة اللون.
في مؤّخر الرواق، صورة صبيّ صغير معلّقةٍ فوقٍ قنطرة
تعمل أشعّة الشمس على محو معالمها شيئاً فشياً.
على مسافة صغيرة منها، مكيّف هواء يتسرّب منه الماء.
السماء صافية زرقاء، ولا أثر لنسمة هواء.
الباب الحديدي كبير ومشرّع على ممرّ ضيق ينتهي بغرفةٍ
تضيئها نافذة وتزينها شرائط زخرفية بدت لي كزينة
شجرة الميلاد.
دعتني للدخول.
بيتها يروي سيرة حياتها:
صور أطفال،
صور أعراس،
قصاصات جرائد،
أغراض متنوّعة،
سرير،
طاولة،
كرسي،
فرن على الغاز،
راديو...
هنا تأكل، وهناك تقرأ، تنام،
تنتظر مرور الأيام.
السقف عالٍ للغاية
ويحمي بنياًناً خشبيّاً قاتماً.
دنوت من النافذة المطلّة على فناء ضيّق من باطون،
فرأيته مسيّجاً بقضبان معدنيّة
كان قد أخفاها عنّي بريق شمس الظهيرة.
رمقتني وأنا أتفحّص بيتها،
ثمّ مدّت صوبي علبة ملبّس يغشوها الغبار.
ابتسمت لي،
بادلتها الإبتسام.
في الخارج، الحرارة تقارب الـ ٤٠ درجة،
أمّا هنا، فالجوّ منعش.
قدّمت لي فنجان قهوة.

The old woman is all smiles.
I don't understand what she seems so eager to tell me,
but it is clear she is happy to see I am paying attention to her humble house.
She lives in a tight alley,
which comes from the busy market street
up the gentle slope,
leading into the inner-block compound.
She lives in the corridor.
Yet, her house is the most inviting:
a simple opening along this long, otherwise uneventful concrete wall,
decorated with six potted plants,
three on either side.
There are two clotheslines on top of each other,
both filled with the day's laundry,
mostly dark colored dresses.
At the end of the corridor,
a large,
faded painting of a boy hangs above an archway.
An air conditioner is leaking its water a bit further.
The sky is a spotless,
flat,
blue surface,
and there is no air to be felt.
The large metal door is wide open and reveals,
behind a small passageway,
a room,
dimly lit by its single window in the far corner,
and what appears,
to my eye,
to be Christmas decorations.
She invites me in.
The room is her life story:
wedding and baby pictures,
news clippings,
random objects,
a bed,
a table,
a chair,
a gas stove,
a radio.
This is where she sleeps,
she eats,
she reads,
she waits for the days to go by.
The ceiling is surprisingly high and reveals a dark wooden structure.
I reach the window
which looks out onto a tight concrete yard
to realize it has bars on it:
the brightness of the midday summer sun shining in makes them disappear.
She looks at me looking at her house,
she points to a bowl with a few dusty candies,
I smile back.
It is nearly 40 degrees outside
but here,
the air is cool.
She offers coffee.

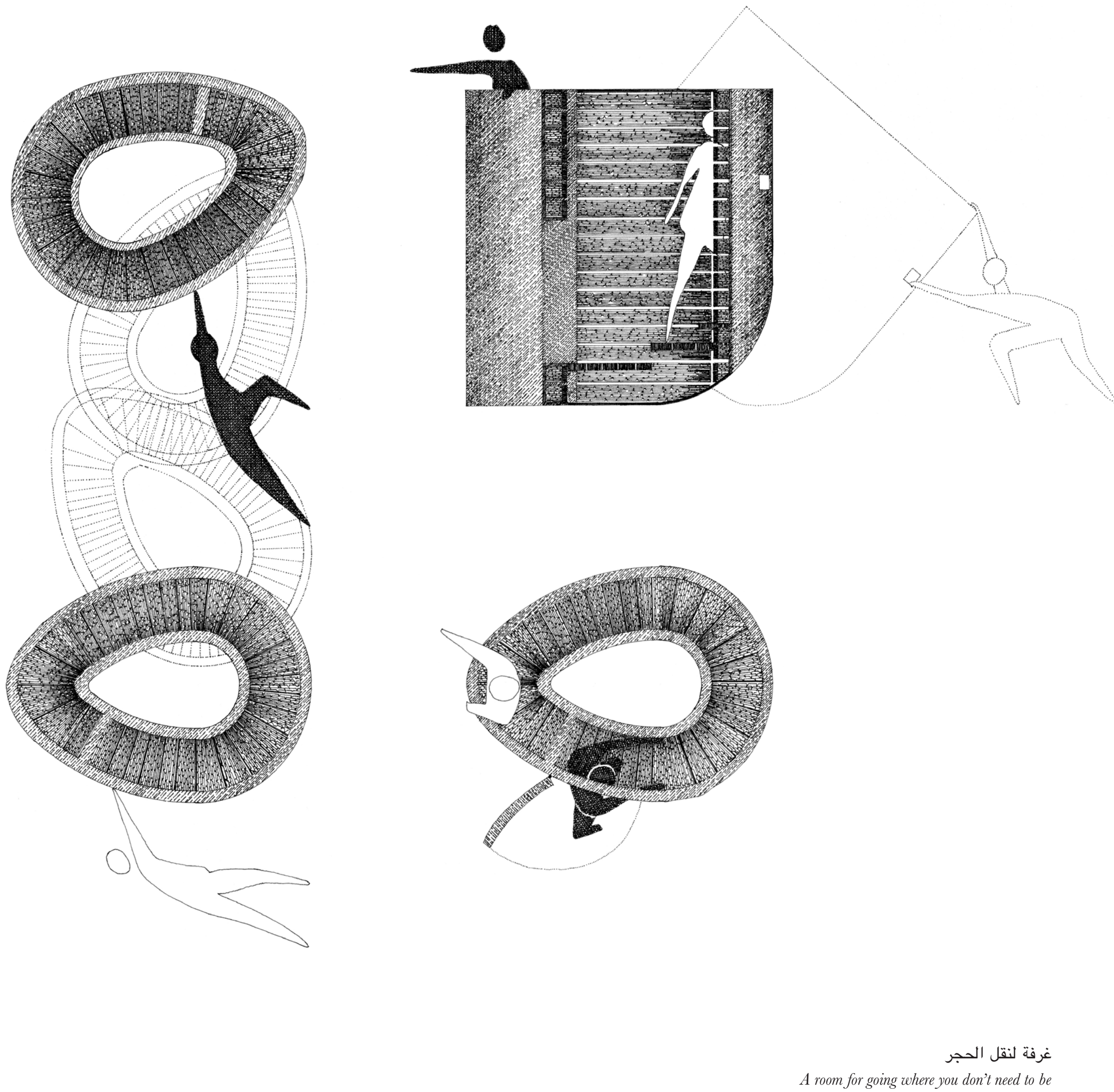


غرفة المشاركة في أمور أساسيّة

A room for sharing essential things

من الواضح أنني لست من هذا البلد.
ما أبذله من جهود لٍلإنخراط فيه،
لا أراها تجدي نفعاً.
أنتعل حذاءً قديماً،
أرتدي الجينز وكنزة عاديّة،
ومع ذلك، لا أمل.
عندما أتجوّل في الباشورة، أشعر بأنني دخيلة.
"هل تعرفين أين تقع Sodeco Square"،
سألني رجل آتٍ لا أعرف من أين.
يرتدي نظّاراتٍ شمسيّة،
ينتعل حذاءً للركض لمّاعاً أبيض اللون،
على رأسه كسكيت، وعلى ظهره حقيبة.
أكسسوارات غير مألوفة لدى سكّان الباشورة.
اعتقدته سائحاً تائهاً يريد مساعدة.
"نعم، أعرف أين، عليك أن تسير بهذا الإتجاه
حتى شارع الإستقلال، ثم تنعطف يساراً
فتجد بناية السوديكو أمامك، على بعد
خمسة دقائق مشياً."
"حسناً، دعيني أنا أدلّك، خذي بالأحرى هذا الإتجاه،
وسترينها هنا بالتحديد"، أجابني مشيراً بإصبعه نحو السوديكو.
تجمهر حولنا بضعة رجال
متسائلين لماذا كل هذه الأصابع المرفوعة.
"أنا أعرف أين تقع سوديكو سكوير
ولست بحاجة للذهاب إلى هناك، بل باقية هنا.
هل أنت تقصدها أم لا؟"، قلت له حائرة.
"لا، أجابني، هنا ليس السوديكو،
من هذه الناحية من الشراع، هي البسطة،
الباشورة من هنا،
السوديكو من هناك."
نظرتُ حواليّ، فإذا برجال آخرين ينضمّون إلينا.
وبدا الجميع يبحثون عن السوديكو.
في أخر الشارع،
السوق تضجّ بين البنايات العالية وحركة السير
المنتظمة على الجسر الحديدي.
كلّ شيء يبدو طبيعيّاً.
فجأةً، اخترقت الحشد إمرأة قصيرة،
محدودبة تحت فستانها القطني الرمادي اللون،
وتحمل بيدها أكياس بقالة.
إقتربت منّي وسألني:
"هل تبحثين عن السوديكو؟"
قاطعها صاحب الكسكيت والحذاء الأبيض:
"هنا الباشورة. لا تصغي إليها، إنها تركيّة."
هي — سوديكو تقع بهذا الإتجاه. لماذ تقول لها بأنني تركيّة؟
هو — لم أقصد هذا، بل اعتقدت أنك تتكلّمين التركيّة.
هي — أنا لا أتكلّم التركيّة، أنا إبنة الباشورة.
هو — كنت أشرح للسيّدة كيف تذهب إلى السوديكو.
هي — إسمعني جيداً، السوديكو تقع من هنا.
هنا، ساد الإلتباس.
من الذي يريد فعلاً الذهاب إلى السوديكو؟
أنا — حسناً، أشكركم جميعاً.
سأتجوّل قليلاً هنا، ثمّ أذهب إلى السوديكو.
شققت طريقي بين الرجال، ومضيت دون أن ألتفت ورائي.
خفتت أصواتهم وهدرت مولّدات الكهرباء.
إنها الثالثة بعد الظهر.

It is clear I am not from here.
No matter how hard I try to blend in, there's nothing I can really do about it.
I wear worn running shoes,
jeans,
a plain t-shirt,
but still, I don't hold a chance.
As I walk through Bachoura, I stand out like a sore thumb.
"Do you know Sodeco Square?"
a man asks me from out of nowhere.
He is wearing sunglasses,
a baseball cap,
bright
shiny
white
running shoes
and a backpack,
all very unusual items for a Bachourian.
I think he must be a lost tourist,
looking for directions.
"Yes, indeed I know where it is.
You just walk a block here,
to Independence street,
you turn left
and it will be right in front of you, within a five-minute walk."
"Well, let me tell you, you just go this way," he says,
pointing toward Sodeco,
"and it's right there."
A few men gather around us,
probably wondering what all these pointed fingers in the air might be for.
"I know where Sodeco Square is,"
I answer, slightly confused from his response.
"I don't want to go to Sodeco,
I want to be here.
Do you need to go to Sodeco?"
"No, here is not Sodeco," he replies.
"On this side of the street is Basta,
on this side, Bachoura.
Sodeco is that way."
I look around.
More men have gathered.
Everyone seems to be looking for Sodeco.
Down the street the market is thriving.
Up the tight alley cutting through tall buildings,
the usual traffic on the metal bridge.
All seems quite normal.
"Yes, I know this," I reply.
"Thank you for your help."
A small woman,
curled up shoulders under her dark
gray,
heavy
cotton dress,
makes her way through the small crowd,
pushing,
grocery bags in hand.
She comes right up to me and asks:
"Are you looking for Sodeco?"
The man in the baseball cap and white shoes interrupts:
"This is Bachoura. Don't listen to her, she is Turk."
She – Sodeco is that way. Why are you telling her I am a Turk?
He – I wasn't telling her you're a Turk, I thought you were speaking Turkish.
She – I don't speak Turkish, I live in Bachoura.
He – I am telling her how to get to Sodeco.
She – Listen to me: Sodeco is this way.
Confusion abounds.
Who wants to go to Sodeco square anyway?
Me – Ok, ok, thank you.
I will just look around a bit longer
and I will go this way
to Sodeco after.
Thank you.
I make my way through the men,
leaving without looking back.
Their voices fade away as the noise from the generators start.
It is three o'clock.



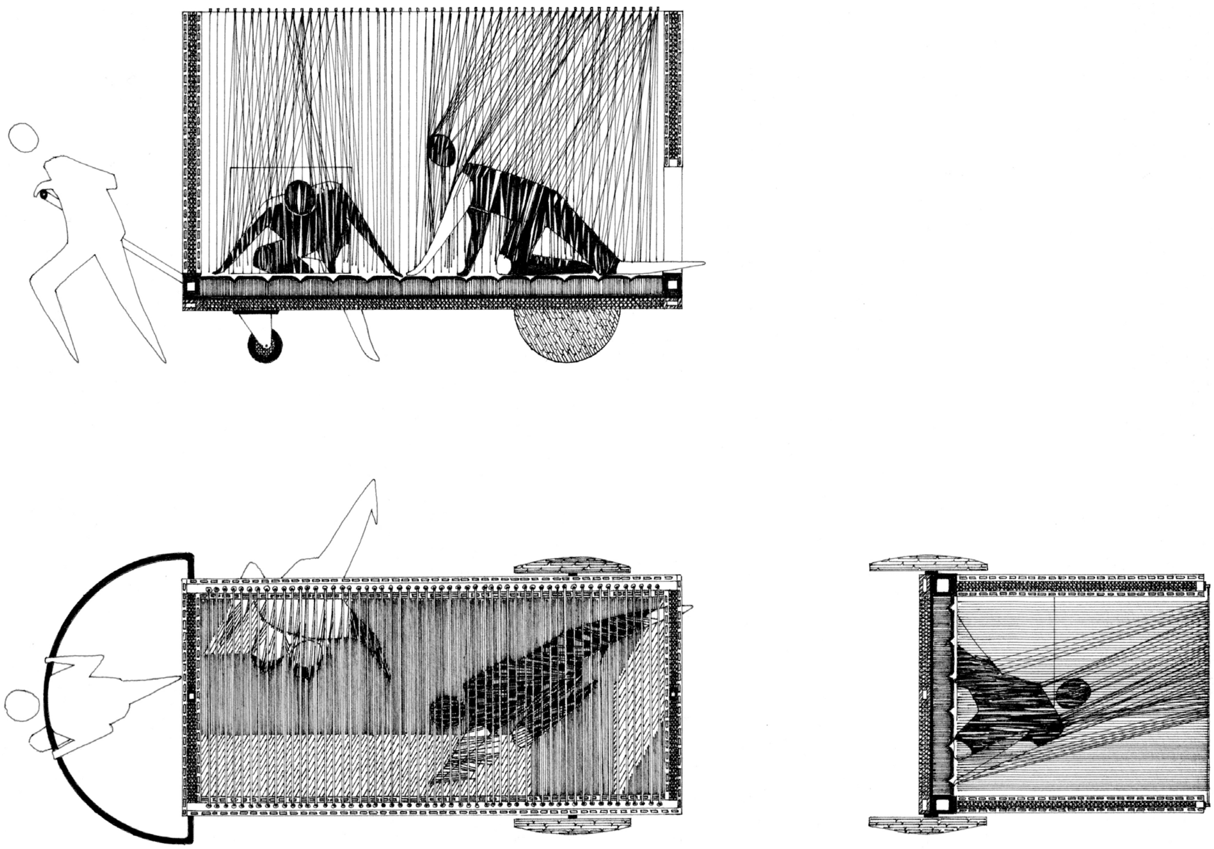
غرفة لنقل الحجر

A room for going where you don't need to be

وسط أرض بورغطّاها ركام الدمار وتلال نفايات
تحوم فوقهًا أسراب الذباب،
تنتصب واجهات أبنية بائسة شبه مهجورة
تتنامى في حماها النباتات.
الطوبوغرافيا المسطّحة نسبيّاً، ملائمة لنموّ أعشاب برّية
وأزهار معظمها صفراء.
عند أبعد زاوية خلفيّة منها،
ارتفاع مفاجيء للأرض (ربما هو ردمٌ دُفن تحته الطابق الأول من البناء)،
حيث فجوة بين حائطين من باطون
تؤدّي إلى مجموعة مساكن من غرفة واحدة.
هنا، صادفت ذات يوم ثلاثة أولادٍ يلعبون
متخيلّين أنهم طبّاخون، مستعملينً خسّة مهترئة
وعلبة مكسورة من البلاستيك الأزرق
أظنّهم وجدوها في أكوام من مقتنيات بالية وأوانٍ متروكة
على بعد بضعة أمتار.
كما وجدوا أيضاً لوحة خشبيّة للعمل
وصندوقين من خشب للجلوس عليهما.
حضوري في المكان أثار فضولهم،
فراحوا يضحكون بوجل مختبئين مداورةً الواحد خلف الآخر.
اليوم، لا أثر لحياة هنا ولا أولاد يلعبون.
أشعة الشمس الصيفيّة الحارقة تفاقم الروائح الكريهة
وتحول دون مجرّد التفكير باللعب.
لكنّ نورها يضفي على النباتات البرّية بريقاً جميلاً.
الدوالي المعرّشة غزت الأبواب والنوافذ الخلفيّة
ولم تدع ينفذ من تحت أوراقها سوى هيكل مكيّف باقٍ
كآخر دليلٍ على حياة كانت هنا.
وحدها شجرة المطّاط الضخمة تؤنس المكان بظلّها الوارف.
هذه ليست أرضاً مهجورة: إنها حديقة مبتدعة،
يخترقها ممرّ محدّد، يمكننا أن نرى على امتداده
تنسيقات أزهار طبيعيّة.
في الصيف، فيما شمس الأصيل تظلّل الحديقة،
تبدو الأبنية غارقة في لعبة الظلّ والضوء، متموّجة بالأشكال والألوان.
هكذا هي الواجهة التي وقفت أمامها،
حيث الشبابيك الغائبة تكشف من وراء إطاراتها السوداء
عمق الغرف الخالية من أيّة حركة.
ضجيج الشارع يحجبه سور عالٍ من الباطون، ما يجعل سكون المكان
ملائماً لسماع حفيف السقّايات وهي تتسلّق شجرة المطّاط.
«صباح الخير سيّدتي!»
فاجأني صوت فتاة أطلّت برأسها من كوّةٍ سوداء
في الطابق العلوي،
ثمّ اختفت.
فتاة أخرى، أكبر منها سنّاً، أطلّت من كوّة آخرى،
كوّة نافذة إنفتحح مصراعها المكسور بسهولة
متيحاً للفتاة المورّدة الخدين أن تطلق ضحكتها
وتغنّي لي:
«انتِ الأجمل».
عصفورتان صغيرتان،
جميلتان، فرحتان،
لم أتوقعهما معشّشتين في ظلال

Standing in the middle of a decrepit lot,
full of garbage and flies,
the façades of semi-abandoned buildings protect the growing wilderness.
The relatively flat topography is a perfect terrain for weeds and flowers,
mostly yellow,
to grow.
In the far back corner
the land suddenly goes up
(perhaps over what used to be the first floor of a now buried building),
to a narrow opening between two one-story-high concrete walls,
leading to the inner block of one-room houses.
I saw three kids play there once.
They were pretending to cook,
using what was left of a rotting lettuce
and a broken plastic bowl
they had probably found in the pile of randomly abandoned goods
and other unwanted belongings,
a few feet away.
They had also found a little wooden platform to stand on,
and two wooden boxes to sit on.
They were curious of my presence
and giggled,
hiding behind one another in chronological order.
Today there are no kids to be seen.
The sun is certainly too hot for play
and the smell of garbage,
well,
could overpower any idea of a game.
But the light embraces the wild plants.
The growing vines have already taken over back doors and service windows,
leaving only the thickness of an a/c unit protruding
as a reminder of life behind the thick gnarling leaves.
A gigantic rubber tree offers the clemency of some shade.
This is no abandoned lot: it is an impromptu garden,
through which cuts a well-defined and well-used path,
along which to appreciate all of the natural arrangements.
As the summer afternoon sits comfortably over the wild,
the surrounding façades appear in a play of shadows, textures and colors.
It is particularly so with the façade in front of which I am standing,
where the missing windows reveal
in their black rectangles
the depth of rooms behind them,
each one empty of any visible activity.
The sound of the street is kept quiet by the tall concrete fence,
a perfect acoustical environment
to hear the sound of small lizards climbing up the rubber tree trunk.
“Bonjour Madame!”
says a small head popping out of one of the black holes,
from the upper floor.
The face of a little girl appears overly colorful amidst the darkness of the missing window.
She quickly disappears.
Another girl, slightly older, comes out of a different hole,
laughing even more.
From the far opening,
the broken screen is briskly pushed opened,
long enough for the colorful little girl to sing:
“C’est toi la plue jolie!”

Two pretty,
unexpected,
joyful
little birds
have made themselves a nest
in the depth of the garden’s rooms.

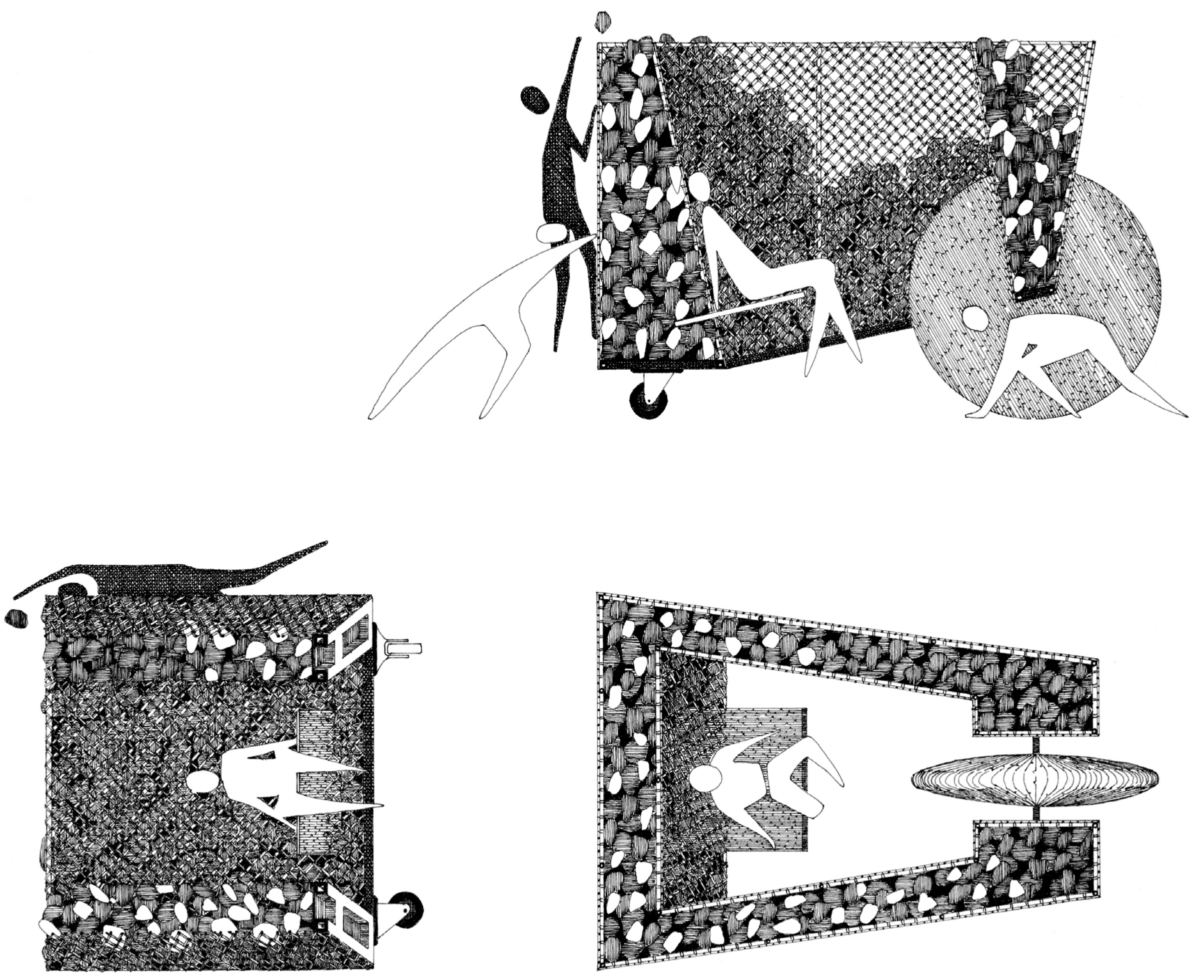


غرفة للاختباء في ظلال غرفة

A room for hiding in the shadows of a room

عند تقاطع شارعي ٥٣ و٥٤ من قطاع ٢٥،
بناء حجريّ قديم قد تقرّر هدمه قريباً على ما يبدو.
ما يميّز هذا المبنى، عدا صيوانه المستطيل
القابع خلف صفّ من القناطر، هو السبيل
الشعبي الذي كان ينعش السكان.
معلم حفاوة نادرة في الباشورة.
وفاءً له، سارع السكّان إلى انتزاعه
قبل أن تعمل الجرّافة على هدمه،
وأعادوا تركيبه في الجهة المقابلة من الشارع،
قريباً من ما أصبح اليوم ساحةً عامّة صغيرة.
معلم حفاوة آخر في الباشورة.
على بلاط تلك الساحة، طاولة محاطة بأربعة مقاعد
يجلس حولها شبّان يلعبون الورق،
تحت سقف من خيزران عُلّقت فيه بعض الأضواء.
في عزّ الصيف، شجيرات الموز المزروعة في فخاريّات
تسدّ تقريباً خلفيّة الساحة وجانبيها.
في بقعة الأرض المتاخمة، موقف لسيّارة الإسعاف.
مجموعة رجال يلهون عند زاوية المبنى، جالسين
على صناديق خشبيّة أو على صدوع حجارته
أو عتبة بابه.
في الجهة المقابلة، سوق مرتجلة تقام خلال النهار.
البضائع تنظّم بعناية على علب من كرتون، كبيرة
ومسطّحة، تُفرش على الأرض.
من الصعب تحديد موقع هذه السوق. ليس واضحاً
ما إذا كان شارعاً أم موقف سيّارات أو ربما
ورشة بناء مهجورة.
«هل تعلمين لماذ لا يوجد رصيف هنا؟»، سألني رجل بدا
لي من سكّان الباشورة (علمت لاحقاً أنه يعيش في سويسرا
ويقضي هنا عطلته الصيفيّة).
نظرتُ حواليّ.
آه!
من أجل ذلك إذاً السوق ليست في الشارع ولا في موقف
ولا في ورشة بناء مهجورة وطبعاً ليست على الرصيف.
«أراد الحريري أن يبني فيلاّ في الخليج، فجاء إلى هنا
ليقتلع أرصفتنا ويستعمل حجارتها الجميلة. أنظري
هنا، قال لي وهو يقف ليدعني أرى الحجر الذي كان
يجلس عليه، أليس حجراً رائعاً؟
هذا الحجر عمره ٢٠٠ سنة.
يوم أتى رجاله، صرخت بوجههم محتجّاً
وصرخ معي رجال الحيّ. لكننا لم نستطع
أن ننقذ سوى هذا الحجر.»
....
هذه حكايات يرويها الناس.
أجل، هذا الحجر جميل، قديم، متآكل.
ولو استطاع النطق،
لروى لنا على الأرجح حكاياته الخاصّة.

There is an old stone building,
on the corner of streets 53 and 54, sector 25,
which will apparently soon be demolished.
The main attraction of this building,
other than the open porch behind repeated arches,
was its public fountain.
A rare amenity in Bachoura.
So the neighbors ripped it out before the bulldozer came to demolish the building,
and installed it across the street,
next to what has now become a small square,
dedicated to public use.
Another rare amenity in Bachoura.
On the paving of the public square sit four plastic chairs
and a table
where boys play card games.
A few lights have been hung under a bamboo cover
and now that summer is well under way,
the potted banana plants are almost completely closing off the sides and back of the square.
On the adjacent lot,
a parking space for the ambulance.
A group of men sit at the corner of the building,
over wooden boxes,
in the crevasses of the building,
or over its doorways
across from where a small improvised market has been arranged for the day.
The merchandise is carefully organized over large flattened cardboard boxes,
laid out on the ground.
It's unclear whether the market is on the street,
or what could be a parking lot,
or perhaps a forgotten construction site.
"You know why there are no sidewalks here?"
asks a man who appears Bachourian
(but as will turn out, lives in Switzerland and is only visiting relatives for the summer).
I look around.
Ah!
That's why the market isn't in the street,
nor in a parking lot,
nor in a construction site,
or even less so on the sidewalk.
"Hariri wanted to build himself a house in the Gulf,
so he came here
and ripped out our sidewalks so he could use the stones.
These are beautiful stones.
Look here,"
he says as he gets up to let me see the stone he was sitting on.
"Isn't this a beautiful stone?
200 years old.
That's how old this stone is.
But I yelled at him,
oh yes,
we all yelled.
But this was the only stone we were able to save."
…
The stories people will tell.
Yes, indeed, this is a beautiful piece of rock,
old,
worn.
If it could speak,
it would probably have some stories of its own.

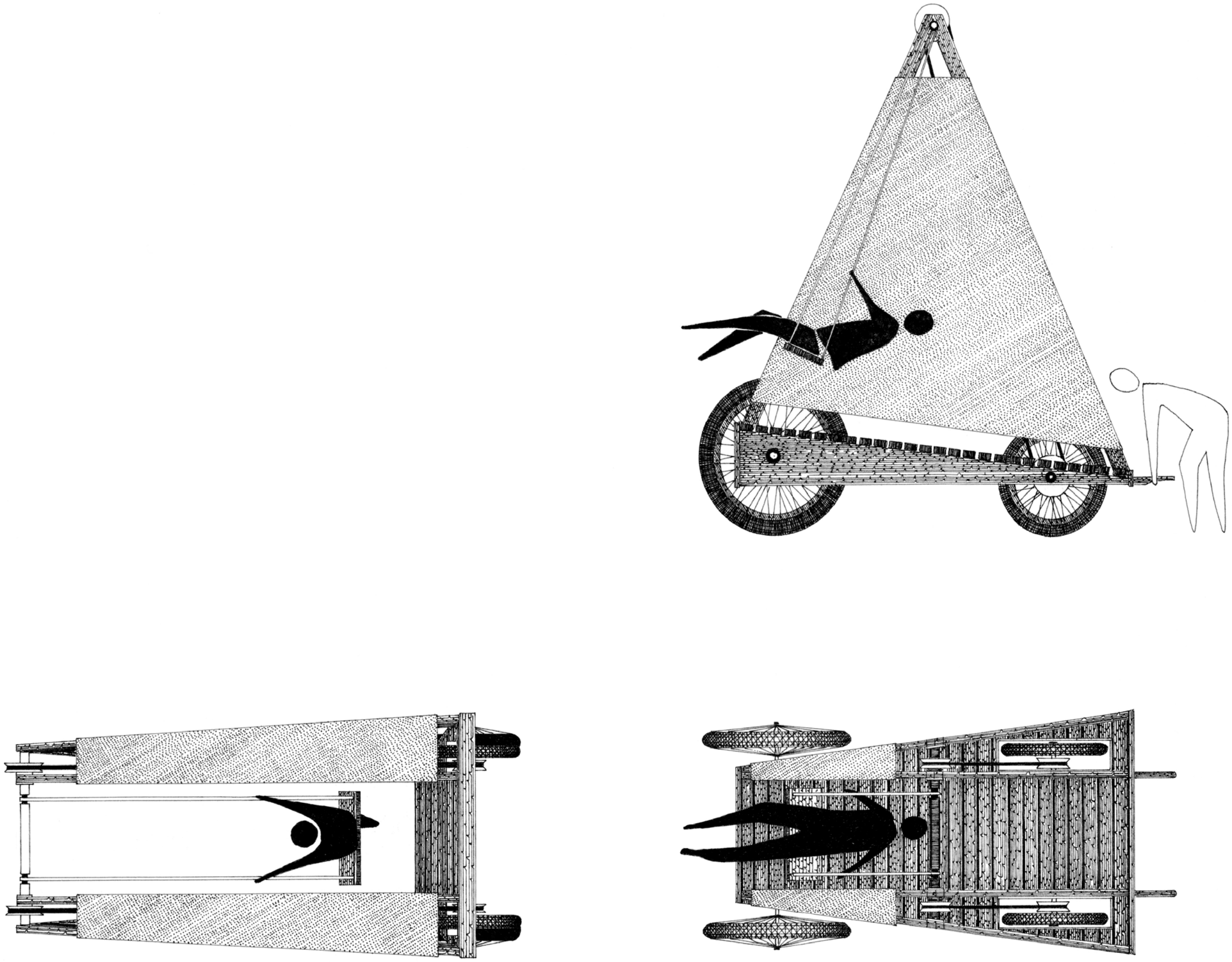


غرفة لنقل الحجر

A room for carrying stones

المنظر شبه كامل:
أرض شاغرة تقع بالتحديد عند نهاية الشارع
المتدّ على منحدر خفيف،
محاطة بمبنيين، واحد من طابقين،
غرفهُ مطليّة بأزرق بلون السماء فوقها
(من السهل رؤية تماثل اللونين كون السقف لم يعد موجوداً)،
والآخر مبنى جديد لكن فارغ كالأول.
نستطيع أن نلاحظ،
في طرف الأرض البور، إنخفاضاً قويّاً
يقسم الأرض قسمين متساويي المساحة،
كاشفاً عن أبنية أخرى مهجورة،
وعن واجهة أنيقة
بأخاديدها البيضاء والسوداء،
تترك فسحةً واسعة بما يكفي لنرى من بعيد
الجامع الجديد وسط المدينة.
على الرصيف،
رجلٌ جالس على كرسيّ بلاستيكي،
يدخّن الأركيلة ويحتسي القهوة.
إل جانبه،
شاحنة مقفلة بيضاء،
مغطّاة بغطاء أزرق سميك،
أقفلت دكّانها لهذا اليوم.
خلفه،
تتوقّف شاحنته بغطائها المنصوب خيمةً
بينها وبضعة أعمدة خشبيّة قريبة.
من الصعب أن نعرف أيهما يسند الآخر،
لكن كلّ شيء ثابت على ما يبدو.
داخل الشاحنة،
لدى الرجل كلّ ما يلزم لصنع القهوة،
لسماع الراديو، لتناول ألواح شوكولا قديمة
(ربّما ذابت عدّة مرّات)،
كما لديه أريكة
"أكل الدهر عليها وشرب"، على ما أظنّ.
المبنى المقابل، أعلى من الأبنية المجاورة،
يلقي بظلٍّ يمتدّ حتى الكرسي الذي يجلس عليه.
"مرحباً، أتريدين فنجان قهوة؟"،
سألني من خلال الدخان المتصاعد حوله.
على مسافة من الشاحنة المقهى،
انخفاضٌ مفاجيء للأرض.
بالنظر إلى أسفله،
نرى شاحنة أخرى بيضاء مليئة بأدوات ميكانيكيّة،
وحولها عدّة سيّارات محرّكاتها مكشوفة،
حيث يبدوالجميع منهمكين بالعمل.
"أتريدين فنجان قهوة؟"
بالعودة إلى الشاحنة المقهي،
وجدت خلفها طاولة وبضعة كراسي بلاستيكيّة
فوق سجّادة مفروشة على الأرض
وحول لمبة متدلّية.
أعتقد أنها غرفته الخلفيّة الحفيّة.
لا حركة فيها حتى الآن.
"أتريدين فنجان قهوة؟"
سألني ملتفتاً إليّ.
عند حدود الظلّ الطويل،
رجل آخر جالس على كرسي بلاستيكي
يمجّ سيجارته ببطء شديد.
"أتريدين فنجان قهوة؟"
"لا، شكراً، أنا لا أشرب القهوة"
...
يتنشّق أركيلته
...
يتطلّع إلى الشارع
...
يحتسي جرعة
...
"أتريدين فنجان قهوة؟"

The perspective is just about perfect:
the empty lot sits at the end of the street
down a gentle slope
framed in between an abandoned two-story building
with rooms painted as blue as the sky above
(one can tell since the roof is nowhere to be found)
and a brand new one,
just as empty.
One can guess,
at the far end,
a big drop
dividing the empty lot in two more or less equal parts
opening up the view toward more abandoned empty structures on one side,
and an elegant white façade striped with thin black windows on the other,
leaving just enough room to let the new mosque downtown be part of the picture.
On the sidewalk,
a man sits in his plastic chair,
smoking arguileh,
drinking coffee.
Beside him,
a white van
covered in a blue tarp
has closed business for the day.
Behind him,
his van is indefinitely parked with its own blue tarp,
hung between the vehicle and wooden posts.
It's unclear which is holding which.
But all seems to stay steady.
In the van is everything one needs to prepare coffee,
listen to the radio,
eat old,
probably melted chocolate bars,
and an armchair
that must have seen better days.
The building facing his impromptu café is unusually tall
and casts a long shadow,
stopping just past the man's chair.
A convenient shade for a late afternoon coffee.
"Hello! Do you want coffee?"
he asks from within the smoke.
Past the café, indeed is a significant topographical drop.
Looking down from the top,
another white van is parked on the far lot corner.
This one is filled with car parts.
Four cars are parked around it,
hoods open
and all seem to be very busy.
"You want coffee?"
Looking back toward the café
onto its other side,
a table is set up
with a few more plastic chairs
along with a lamp
and an old carpet on the ground.
The back, cozy room, I guess.
No one has moved still.
"You want coffee?"
he says with his head turned.
Further into the depth of the shade provided by the building,
another man sits in his own plastic chair,
smoking,
ever so slowly,
a cigarette.
"You want coffee?"
"Thank you so much,
but I don't drink coffee."
…
Inhales some arguileh.
…
Looks out to the street.
…
Has a sip.
…
"You want coffee?"



غرفة للإحتراس من تشتّت الأفكار

A room for keeping distractions away

Part 4

And in the end, a few rooms

or why make room for Bachoura in the changing context of Beirut

Lebanon is a country that has had a long history of successive conquest, destruction, violence, intense construction, and reinvention of its landscape. From Phoenicians to Romans, Crusaders, Mamluks, Ottomans and French, all have left their mark throughout the country's cities, villages, and mountains. The affirmation of one's power through the destruction of cities, followed by the reconstruction of a new fabric and major landmarks recurs as a familiar pattern. In its more recent history, political struggles have been manifested widely, and fought in the capital, where several upheavals have overturned contemporary Beirut and transformed the city yet again. Through the long and complex civil war, followed by occupation, assassinations, and series of bombardments, the city, first divided along what came to be known as the Green Line, saw huge numbers of civilians fleeing the country or being displaced within its boundaries. Its buildings were severely damaged, sometimes abandoned, sometimes reduced to partial inhabitation without electricity or running water, with holes in the roofs, broken stairways, missing doors and windows.

While general discourse has widely condemned the unregulated growth of the city and its suburbs since the days of the civil war as the main factor behind constant traffic congestion, encroachment of private space on green or public land, and similar concerns, Jad Tabet shows in *Beyrouth* that these processes are not unprecedented in the city's history. To begin with, its geographical location, a narrow plateau interrupted by two major hills, torn between sea and mountain, reduces its capacity for large expansions. Building densely and developing additional layers over preexisting fabric are a necessity. Independently of its physical constraints, the city's history also shows an iterative process of demolition and reconstruction, accompanied by regulations that have contributed to shaping the current situation. While archeological artifacts show that the city has been continuously occupied since 3000 BC, it is really during the 19th century, under the Ottoman Empire, that the city took on a real expansion. A demographic explosion took it from around 6,000 inhabitants at the turn of the century, to over 100,000 just before the 20th century.[116] The population kept growing in the first half of the 20th century under the French Mandate, to reach, in 1970, one million inhabitants, or 42% of the country's total population.[117] While the development of the city took a slow start under the succeeding periods, the 19th century saw Beirut truly flourish, especially with the building of the new port and the Damascus Road. While Damascus was and remained for a long time thereafter the central power of the region, the new road made it possible to link the two cities in a

116. Though no official census has been carried out since 1932, the country's population is now estimated at 5.8 million people, with an additional million Syrian refugees. Beirut is home to approximately 2 million people, a third of the country's total population.

117. Kassir, Samir. 2003. *Histoire de Beyrouth.* Paris: Fayard, 515.

13-hour ride—instead of a three-day journey[118] —allowing for a great number of both goods and people to travel inland. The new port in Beirut, which superseded those of Haifa, Saida, and Tripoli, managed most of European boats, merchandise, and travelers. The intra-muros city acted as the main place of business, and works undertaken by the 1820s to improve hygienic conditions, road networks, water canalizations, and similar sanitation projects helped new neighborhoods to develop along the Damascus Road and densified what had been, up to that point, relatively open fields and gardens with a growing number of bourgeois residences. As the city grew, changes in the legislation overseeing urban growth brought profound transformations in the production of the city. As Tabet explains, occidental legislation known as *Tanzimats* replaced older religious ones between 1839 and 1856. A series of laws were shaped which progressively linked cadastral numbers to names of occupants, gave ownership titles, shifted taxation from in-kind to monetary, legalized mortgages, purchase of land, seizures and transfers of property, and perhaps most importantly for what was to happen in the midst of the First World War and again during the civil war, introduced the notion of eminent domain. If these reforms were presented as means to improve public hygiene, aesthetics and efficiency, they made it possible for the Empire to control more directly, in a top-down manner, the development of the city.[119]

Gemmeyze, Saifi, Bachoura, Zokak el-Blat, and Minet el-Hosn—areas adjacent to the city center now considered heritage or historical neighborhoods—grew to become mixed-used areas, with commerce on the ground floor and apartments in the upper ones. But in the center per se, the urban vision of the Ottoman Empire was partially restrained by business owners who saw as detrimental to their interest two planned roadways intended to link the port directly to the Damascus Road—by way of the existing *souks*. For a number of years, the Empire tried in vain to accomplish this plan. But in the spring of 1915, as the Great War was nearing the shores of Lebanon and as it began to be apparent that the Empire's days were numbered, an order was given for the plan to proceed as a necessary step toward the development of the city. Occupants of the *souks* were given a three-day notice to evacuate, and so started the demolition.[120] Britain bombed the city center three years later, so when the Alliance "liberated" the city, it found a center in ruins and an unfinished project of modernization.[121] The following French Mandate continued the Ottoman's project, expropriating yet more properties and enlarging roadways well into the 1930s. Building on what the Ottomans had begun, orthogonal lines were finally drawn, sparing very little of the old Arab city. The old city lost its *intra-muros* character and historical meaning, and was officially reduced to the port district. Saifi, Bachoura, and Minet el-Hosn completed the business and entertainment quarter, on which the populace bestowed a perceptive unity by naming the general area *al-Balad*, that is, the city.[122]

Samir Kassir explains, in *Histoire de Beyrouth*, how any given block within the Balad showed both a modern façade and traditional interiors, where land use and settlement could be more informal. Despite the hard work of modernity, the occupation of these interiors showed the resilience of tradition: shops, sheds, one-room tenements grouped around a common yard, or

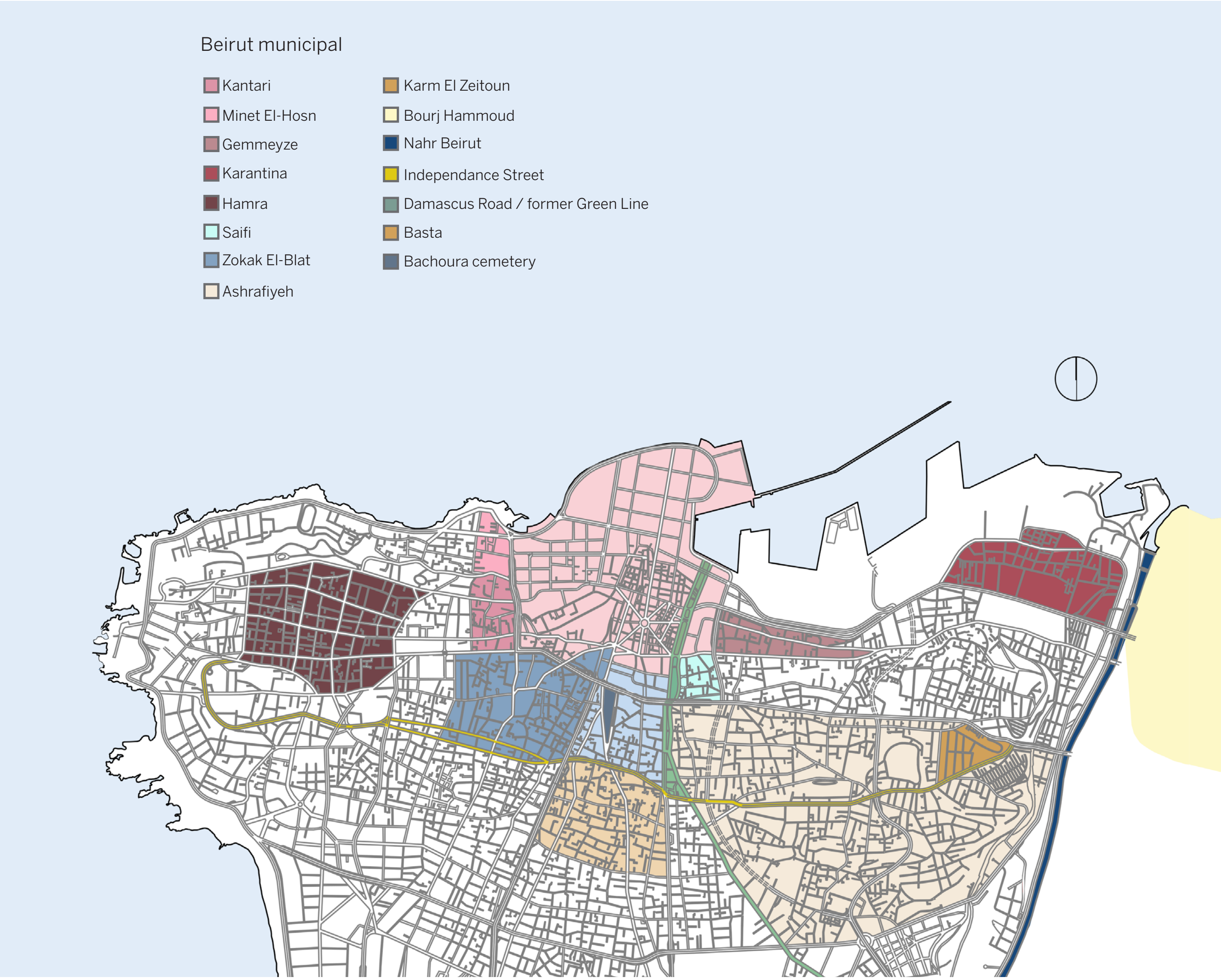
118. Ibid., 101.

119. Tabet, Jad. 2001. *Beyrouth.* Paris: Institut français d'architecture, 9.

120. Kassir, *Histoire de Beyrouth*, 191.

121. Tabet, *Beyrouth*, 11.

122. Kassir, *Histoire de Beyrouth*, 343.


Beirut municipal
Kantari
Minet El-Hosn
Gemmeyze
Karantina
Hamra
Saifi
Zokak El-Blat
Ashrafiyeh
Karm El Zeitoun
Bourj Hammoud
Nahr Beirut
Independance Street
Damascus Road / former Green Line
Basta
Bachoura cemetery

storage for a variety of goods were all still part of the new fabric. While the Mandate made every possible effort to modernize Beirut, continues Kassir, the informal didn't cease growing, progressively taking over terraces, shacks being built within or on top of new buildings, along with rooftop sheds for breeding pigeons.[123] Through the term of the Mandate up to the end of the civil war, the story of the Balad is thus one of dual development: one development pushed forward by the desire of those in power for a well-organized and functioning city, the other sustained by the means, needs, and desires of its inhabitants. Despite the efforts of central power to build a modern city with projects such as the port expansion of 1937, allowing some 11,000 boats to come to Beirut instead of the 100 which had been the norm in 1919, or the building of new roads connecting the central city to other important areas in the country (some 2,900 km in 1939),[124] the neglect to provide adequate infrastructure and services to the growing suburbs paved the way for a more informal process of building the city to take shape. A mutual accommodation between the modern and the traditional formed, allowing them to coexist and build on each other. Thus the various expansion episodes were all to be characterized by the conquest of the modern by the traditional, and of the ordered by the informal,[125] within municipal Beirut as much as in its immediate surroundings.

While various areas within the municipal limits slowly acquired ethnic or religious identities from the turn of the 20th century on, with Christians settling to the East and Muslims to the West, the Balad and its adjacent neighborhoods maintained a more diversified character. Naturally, when the civil war erupted in 1975, the city center—not belonging to a specific group other than that of merchants—became a buffer zone, or perhaps more accurately, a battlefield. The Damascus Road was used as the division governing the city's territory, while its bordering neighborhoods were taken over by dissenting groups. Along the 4.5 km of the demarcation line, says Tabet, 23% of buildings were fully demolished, while another 58% were damaged to various extents.[126] As buildings were falling apart, rubble and other domestic trash were thrown to sea; they began to contribute to a landfill that would become, in the 1990s, the foundation for reclaimed land from the city center over the Mediterranean.

The civil war period is complicated, as a war tends to be. Because consensus about the conflict and the events that took place in and around it has yet to be reached, one should refer to specialized political writing to understand its complexities. This being said, it is fair to say that this period became a time of unregulated urban expansion toward the suburbs and the mountains. It placed severe pressure on the city center, its former, now-displaced inhabitants, and its new illegal settlers.

At the end of the civil war in 1990, the Lebanese government found itself incapable of rebuilding the city for a number of reasons. A lack of finances, the great number of landowners who would have to be consulted in the reconstruction efforts—over 40,000[127]—and the pressing public housing project needed to house all the displaced people who had set camp downtown under dire conditions, were all contributing factors. Financing

123. Ibid., 344.

124. Saliba, Robert. 2009. *Beyrouth: Architectures, aux sources de la mondernité 1920–1940.* Marseilles: Parenthèses, 13.

125. Kassir, *Histoire de Beyrouth*, 344.

126. Tabet, *Beyrouth*, 42.

127. Angus, Gavin. and Ramez Bahige Maluf. 1996. *Beirut Reborn: The Restoration and Development of the Central Disctrict.* London: Academy Editions, 14.

of the chosen reconstruction strategy fell onto the private sector. Solidere, the *Société Libanaise pour le Développement et la Reconstruction de Beyrouth*, set up under the late Rafiq Hariri who would soon become prime minister, was given the task of assembling the necessary financing and leading the development process. As one portion of the negotiated terms and in order for this project to take form, the government drew a boundary of some 180 hectares[128] within which all properties, including designated public spaces, became Solidere's. The eminent domain legislation of the 19th century and the work of the Mandate had set legal precedents for this development. Owners were offered a choice. They could receive stocks in Solidere to an equal value of their property—though most would argue that properties were undervalued; or they could submit a large payment to Solidere along with demonstration of capacity to restore their building in line with the official preservation plan and, in exchange, retain ownership of their land and building. Needless to say, few owners had the liquidity to buy back their properties and follow Solidere's guidelines, so most of the central district fell onto the lap of a single, private ownership. Solidere was thus essentially granted the permission to use, transform, demolish, or rebuild any parcel or building it deemed necessary for the development that it itself proposed and for managing the city center thereafter. In addition to this extraordinary power, Solidere was also given the right to reclaim 60 hectares of land on the sea front,[129] extending its power over the shoreline. Its revenues would be free from taxation for a 10-year period,[130] and expenses would be reimbursed by the state for all infrastructural work completed—roads, sidewalks, lamp posts, parking lots, public spaces, etc.

Angus Gavin, acting as head of urban design at Solidere at the time, spoke of the gargantuan project in *Beirut Reborn: The Restoration and Development of the Central District* as "the dream of a reconnected city, a renewed and active center. It is the dream of a new and optimistic generation: the vision of Beirut reborn."[131] Through a long account of the design process that led to the master plan and initial works, Gavin paints the portrait of a very ambitious and unprecedented urban renewal endeavor concerned with preservation, archeology, transport, communication, connectivity, diversity, commerce—in short, a truly engaged and holistic approach to city design. The promise to reunite divided communities in the very site where business had been carried out for hundreds of years prior to the war, and to create a new center opening onto the sea and acting again as the locus for connection with other cities in the country and beyond, set truly high expectations. Whether these expectations were met is still debatable.

Demolition began in 1992, prior to Solidere's reign, on behalf of the government. While several buildings were damaged beyond repair, many will argue that these buildings were brought down with excessive high-explosive demolition charges, so that the foundations of neighboring buildings were affected. In this way, each building, as it collapsed, damaged other buildings, which would then be declared hazardous to public safety and in need of demolition. All in all, approximately 85% of buildings in the city center were taken down[132] and 4,7 million square meters were planned to be built over a 25-year period.[133] *Al-Balad* thus became Solidere.

128. Ibid., 32.

129. Ibid., 13.

130. Ibid., 16.

131. Ibid., 136.

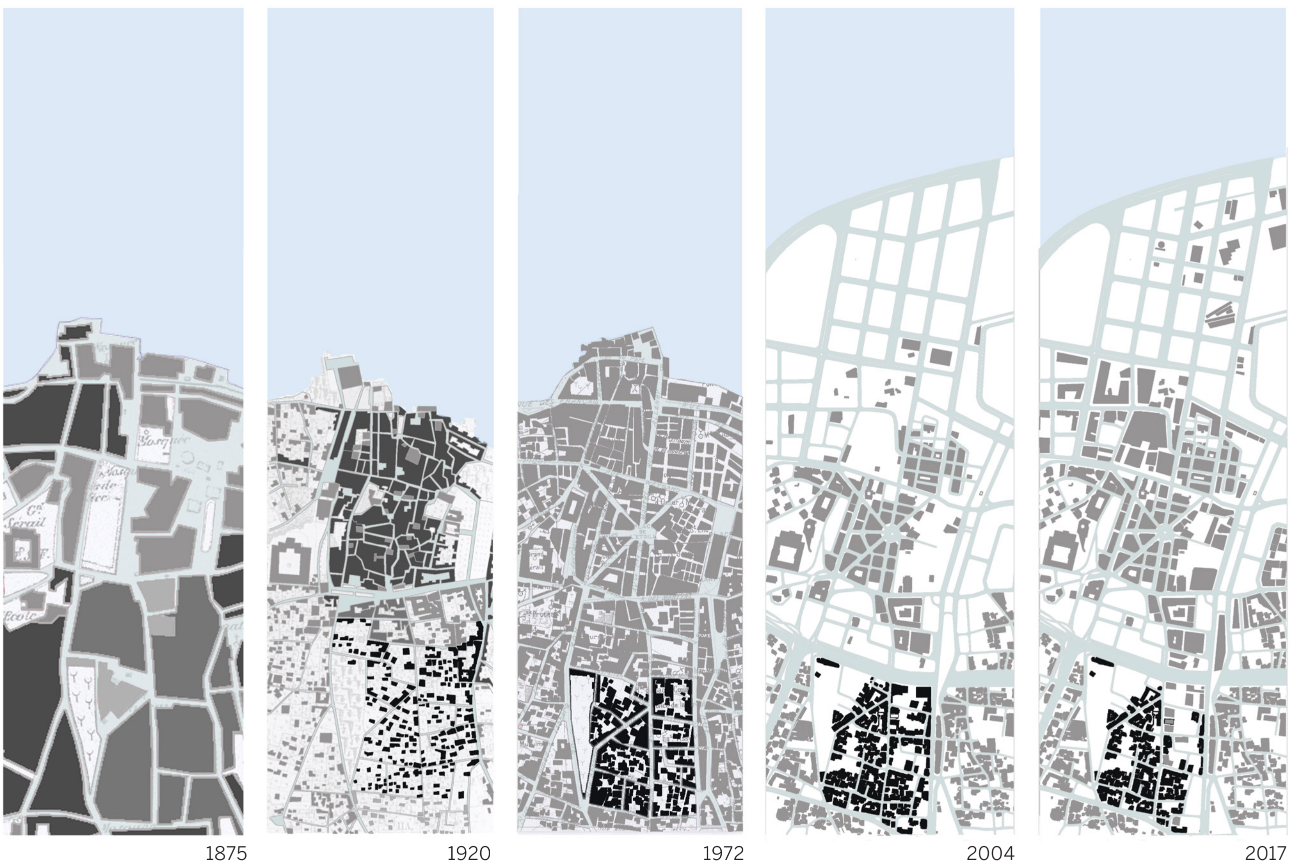
132. Tabet, *Beyrouth*, 50.

133. Ibid., 49.

While the processes and outcomes of this renewal strategy have been widely discussed and questioned popularly, in newspapers and journal articles, in artistic or activist work, and in academic research—at times for the actual urban strategies and outcomes, at others for the rather obvious conflict of interest between private enterprise and the state's changing policies over reconstruction[134]— it has brought to the city yet a new period of reconstruction and transformation. This time though, the transformation is not in the name of an invader, but rather follows the precepts of neoliberal development, resulting in massive capital investment and real-estate speculation. Opinions about Solidere are generally one of two camps: either it is seen as the only mechanism that could bring central Beirut back to its feet or it is the ugly corporation that has destroyed what was left of the prewar fabric. It is either seen as the pragmatics of urban development mixed with clever economics or neoliberalism at its worst, making downtown Beirut a privatized distinct city. It is either understood as the good will of a venture wanting to inject life back into the Lebanese capital or a group that has sold the soul of Beirut to international developers and land owners. Despite these diverging opinions with regard to the reconstruction processes, one must admit that the rapid transformation of the city center brought a sentiment of calm and hope that peace might endure (even if this sentiment must be accompanied by armed policemen and soldiers guarding the newly rebuilt areas). It gave Beirut a chance to redefine itself again as a worldly capital. While this state of affairs needs to be acknowledged, one also needs to see that Solidere actually did very little, if nothing at all, for the city as a larger entity in regards to infrastructure, public transportation, or diversity within the center. At the end of the war, less than half of phone lines were working—which gave way to a massive use of cell phones. Only a third of the electricity generated by power plants was available—power cuts are still a daily occurrence throughout the country. About 80% of water reserves were polluted, and tap water is still unsafe to drink. All waste water treatment facilities were out of service—some have now been rebuilt but are not functioning for lack of financing. The road infrastructure needed major rehabilitation—and we can now witness highway planning from before the war being pulled out of dusty drawers and presented as right-minded, contemporary developments. One also has to see that the spirit in which Solidere has acted since its creation has opened wide the door for more major exclusive developments to take place in historical or more vernacular neighborhoods. Solidere has, in addition, laid the groundwork for its own planning of incremental developments further out into adjacent and peripheral areas.

As such, laws were passed in the early 2000s to loosen regulations that had restricted the height of towers to be built in crowded neighborhoods and demanded that new buildings have a street façade. The consequences of these decisions are now tragic for historical and vernacular areas alike. Firstly, it means that there is a growing deficit of natural light and an overabundance of traffic in narrow streets, which is most of the streets throughout the city. Secondly, it means that the traditional inner block building—i.e. with storefronts on the streets and pedestrian access from the street to common courtyards, private gates, and houses—is now being replaced by the consolidation of properties into a single lot on which sits an oversized floor plate, beneath which sit multiple floor garages from which groundwater needs to be pumped, and above which stand multiple floors of lavish apartments, all trying their best to see the sea. Like neighborhoods, buildings receive very little protection. According to NGO Save Beirut Heritage, of the 1,600

134. Rafiq Hariri was prime minister from 1992 to 1998 and again from 2000 to 2004 while the majority owner of the corporation.



Bachoura's progressive transformation

heritage homes and buildings identified in a 1990 census, only 200 remain today. Needless to say, such ferocious development brings a dramatic change to the physical and social fabrics once supported by the smaller-scale city; it incrementally compromises the details and experience of Beirut.

If it is quite normal for a city to be constituted by all sorts of areas, some more prosperous than others, some better taken care of than others, the obvious inequalities between reconstructed neighborhoods and standing ones, between a new tower and existing buildings, are now everywhere in Beirut: derelict buildings next door to high-tech towers, city blocks without proper electricity next to fully air-conditioned ones, construction workers living in desperate conditions within the site of the luxurious towers they build. And if Solidere and the growing speculation that accompanies it present a healthy image of the city's rebirth, infrastructural challenges remain in most of greater Beirut. Inside the municipal boundary, electricity is usually available on a regular schedule with three-hour power cuts per day, but outside the boundary is randomly provided, with daily 6 to 12-hour cuts. Provision of water, which is unsafe for drinking, is intermittent during the summer months. Garbage is usually picked up by the private company Sukleen, but it is often discarded in abandoned houses or parcels, burnt on the side of a hill, or piled up in heaps along roads or, worse still, along the sea front.[135] Density per square kilometer is high and still on the rise, with a stock of buildings in a wide range of conditions. As Samir Kassir would say, the more the city grows, the more it resembles the entanglement of the *intra-muros* city before the first roads were opened in the dense fabric; streets might be wider but perpetual traffic jams and the encroachment on sidewalks amplify the impression of anomy and of overcrowding.[136] But while Solidere and other major developers are busy rebuilding Beirut, transforming its once mid-size scale to residential high-rises, some pockets of the city are left stagnant—no longer at war, yet not in reconstruction either.

While waiting to see which private investors will eventually take over the remaining areas, some of these areas have taken on a life of their own. They stand secluded from the rapid urban development underway elsewhere; and at the same time they appear as the only remaining places where alternatives to the crushing speculation might still be found.

Bachoura is one such neighborhood. Despite its adjacency to Solidere and its role in the former Balad, Bachoura is now at a standstill, ingrained in an everlasting present, overwhelmed with the weight of the recent past, and without a future other than the eventual *tabula rasa* that will clear the way for developers. There are, of course, other such areas: the southern edge of Ashrafiyeh for instance, parts of Karm el Zeitoun or Karantina, dense areas such as Bourj Hammoud or Ouzai, all of which are for the most part untouched by current growth. But because Bachoura stands next to Solidere, it shows us with crystal clarity the dualities of Beirut, dualities engaged between the city of the conqueror and the city of the dweller. It also demonstrates, this time in concert with Solidere, the consequences engendered by the disengagement

135. A garbage crisis erupted in July 2015. As the government failed to agree on a solution following the closure of the Naameh garbage dump, Sukleen stoped collecting garbage and people took to the streets in protest. In August, Sukleen started picking up garbage again, but with no functioning dump, or any other alternative for waste management, bags were piled under bridges, on empty lots or in the then-dried river bed. As of the beginning of 2018, still no solution was found.

136. Kassir. *Histoire de Beyrouth*, 15.

from the municipality toward its city. On the north side of the Ring Road, Solidere is chief of urban development, the government having signed its rights over to private investments; on the south side, Bachoura goes on about its own business, making do with what is available, while decision-makers apparently couldn't care less for its organization, other than being able to persuade investors to eventually demolish and rebuild. It seems it would make a certain sense to think the municipality would see fit to ensure a coherent distribution of services, infrastructure, and investment across diverse areas. But both Solidere and Bachoura tell a different story.

Bachoura grew from the city walls toward the south and rapidly came to play an important role during the Ottoman Empire, as the direct extension of the business and entertainment quarter. The long triangular cemetery and a hospital, both located on the gently sloping hill overlooking the Balad, were important markers for the area. Multiple-story apartment buildings were built along Tyan Street and the Damascus Road, some of which remain today as remnants of the early Mandate period, as beautifully documented by Robert Saliba in *Beyrouth: Architecture aux sources de la modernité*.[137]

The municipal boundary of Bachoura reaches from a thin sliver on the west side of the cemetery to the Damascus Road, and from the former *intra-muros* city's boundary, to what is now known as Independence Street. Stretching from Hamra to the Nahr Beirut, Independence Street was, and has remained, an important east-west axis and commercial artery through contemporary Beirut. Streets that crossed Bachoura allowed direct passage from the Balad to Basta, the southern district, and beyond. But in 1960, in an effort to ease the growth of vehicular traffic, a partially elevated highway, the Fouad-Chehab Road, locally known as the Ring, drew a new frontier approximately a third of the way into the neighborhood, blocking most north-south connections with the center and dissecting Bachoura in two unequal parts, in terms of surface, but also in terms of future development, as the smaller portion now falls into Solidere's territory. After the war broke out in 1975, two supposedly temporary metal bridges were built over Independence Street, so as to ease the traffic—of tanks. The bridges have well outlived the war and are still there today, allowing traffic to get across the city, but having killed any chance of community ties or development between Bachoura and Basta. The proximity of the neighborhood to the war's demarcation line was fatal for the community, who, for the most part, fled to better places. The unforgiving barrier, used by snipers to control both sides, destroyed the bordering buildings, while inner layers shielded adjacent areas. The Green Line, literally green with the over-grown vegetation that flourished over the 20-year civil war, spread the devastation to its bordering neighborhoods. Not only was Bachoura unfortunately located along the green battlefield, it was also neighbor to downtown, where all had been abandoned to yet more snipers, wild dogs, and corpses. So between the Ring Road and the metal bridges over Independence Street, the cemetery wall and Damascus Road, Bachoura was incrementally closed onto itself, bordered on all sides by relatively impermeable infrastructures.

In the early 1980s, at the peak of the war, a Chiha community, fleeing from the occupied south, settled in Bachoura and was perceived as an unofficial urban seat of the Hezbollah. Bachoura has remained, for the most

137. Saliba, *Beyrouth: Architectures, aux sources de la modernité 1920–1940.*

part, intact; or one should say, appearing as a war-torn zone. Some buildings were turned into workers' housing, providing them with one-room apartments or larger, but over-crowded ones. The demographics have not changed much since, with the addition perhaps of North African and Syrian construction workers who occupy the larger apartment buildings or shelters along the cemetery wall.[138]

Most residents and property owners left during the war, often going overseas, abandoning their buildings. They were then taken over by squatters who have now settled in for a third generation. As is the case for many properties throughout the city, owners are often unknown, or have become multiple when the father has died and passed along the property rights to his family. Disputes arise as to what should be done with the properties, usually settling for large sums of money from developers who then proceed to evict, demolish, and rebuild. The identity of old fabrics—defined by traditional settlements, even during the modern period, of the incremental intimacy from store front on the street to houses at the heart of the blocks—ensured a sense of community and of proximity. But helped by the new laws, developers now embrace the consolidation strategy, seeing the promise of a prosperous future with the building of luxurious towers. Not only are these new towers changing the scale of their neighborhoods, they also attenuate, if not eliminate, the possibility for common space to exist. In exchange, they provide private, gated façades to the street, either surveilled or overtly patrolled.

Though Bachoura was left alone after the end of the civil war, its fate is slowly becoming the same as everywhere else. At the beginning of the documentation presented in this book, in the summer of 2010, evictions had begun. In the summer of 2011, a first building was taken down and an empty lot was fenced behind a cinder block wall. In the course of 2012, evictions continued, two more buildings were taken down, and an abandoned construction site started operating again. By 2014, the construction site was completed as a relatively high-end property, one of the traditional settlements was demolished, and two major excavations were started, one at the corner of the Ring and Damascus, the second over the land where the hospital had once stood, taking away the children's football field. But as it should be with a city as old as Beirut, archeological ruins were found on both excavation sites, putting a halt to the construction plans and leaving exposed a forbidding gap bordering the northern edge of the neighborhood. But as it also is in a city such as Beirut, ways were found to pursue construction, and by 2017, the northern tier of the neighborhood had become BDD, the Beirut Digital District, tearing everything down or building over existing buildings, providing "a one of a kind community" and the"healthiest environment for the young and dynamic force, all at competitive and affordable rates."[139]

Though there is a general disregard for the social, architectural, or urban value of the neighborhood, Bachoura is not derelict. Today it is even more tightly confined between this new luxurious development, two major roadways (one of them elevated), and the cemetery (also at a higher topography); together they articulate very clearly the extent of the neighborhood's

138. The enduring Syrian conflict has increased the general population of the country by an additional 1.2 million refugees, some of whom have settled in Bachoura. Though no official numbers are available, Bachoura's population was significantly denser by the fall of 2014. Surveillance, which had been discreet and mobile, is now taken care of by two unofficial guard posts, disguised as coffee kiosks.

139. Beirut Digital District, promotional material. Accessed January 31, 2018. www.beirutdigitaldistrict.com


Beirut central
Official delimitation of Bachoura
Perceived delimitation of Bachoura
Solidere
Ring Road
Former Green Line
Cemetery
Tyan Street
Independance Street
Bachoura

(non) participation in the city. Despite this it is filled with commerce, craftsmanship, a public elementary school, a mosque, and a vibrant market street.

While it is certain that its disappearance is imminent, Bachoura is not vacant. Despite its empty buildings, either newly renovated, tumbling down, or simply sitting, waiting, it is densely inhabited with people of all ages, occupying every corner in all sorts of creative ways. If Bachoura is neither derelict nor abandoned, it is, without a doubt, uncertain, occupying a temporal no man's land. Its permanence is being challenged, and though it is still used as a territory worthy of inhabitation, it is now under the transformative eye of prosperity. Whether one worries about the historical buildings or the residents of the neighborhood, one can be certain that all will be disposed of. But despite the challenges facing everyday practices during the final days of this vague urbain, possibilities for hopeful self-determination still remain sheltered beneath the precarious protective layer maintained by its inhabitants. Coincidentally, its local name, *Khandaq el-Ghamiq*, brings with it a whole alternative marvelous field: "the deep ditch," in its English translation, suggests a world of its own, physically divided from a world further above, with the promise of unprecedented configurations.

If Bachoura is clearly not a space offered to spontaneous appropriation, as Luc Lévesque would describe the terrain vague[140]—due mainly to its political flavors, which trigger, more often than not, suspicion and surveillance—a terrain surprisingly open to curiosity and imagination can still be found. The close study of Bachoura's details, of its built environment and lived experience, link the creative dimensions of its everyday to its margins, to its unstable context and its imminent disappearance. Its practices, as strange or as banal as they might appear, reveal a Beirut that is still rooted in its traditions, a practice of Beirut that is still able to manage informality within the formal, and a proposal for a Beirut that still welcomes the presence of spontaneity, awkwardness, and inventiveness as bearers of city making. In fact, the close study of Bachoura illustrates de Certeau's "ethics of tenacity"[141] and provides a space from which to reflect upon the city's trajectory. Within the new city, Bachoura presents, as de Certeau would say, a thousand ways of refusing the established order,[142] or, perhaps more precisely, the order that wishes to be established. If de Certeau spoke of ruses, tricks, and tropes being played within the everyday language as ways to displace the scientific, correct, and agreed upon language, ruses practiced in Bachoura act as signs of an embedded memory, of informal appropriations that have taken place in the city's history. They are acts of reminiscence that Beirut can still be a heterogeneous city, one where desires, needs, and narratives may be diverse, and where details might very well tell stories anchored in the Lebanese culture and imagination.

Going where you don't need to be

As is the case for most cities, negative views and perceptions of the terrain vague are very much present in the Lebanese conception. This being said, Beirut's terrains vagues are paradoxically inhabited by a second, contradicting meaning: while being eyesores and dirty, occasionally feared or avoided places, they are also understood as opportunities or signs of hopeful prosperity: as chances to rebuild and move on. Rather than being manifestations of an economic downturn, terrains

140. Lévesque, Luc. 1999. "Montréal, l'informe urbanité des terrains vagues: Pour une gestion créatrice du mobilier urbain." *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine*, 85, no.1: 47–57.

141. Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien,* 46.

142. Ibid.

vagues in Beirut are signs of economic growth soon to come. Even if this chance to reconstruct a possible future comes with the inevitable loss of the urban fabric and its associated ways of using and being in the city, the desire to build a prosperous future devoid of signs of a troubled past holds sway over any open land.

The same goes for the vague urbain, which, in the eye of the developer, seems to appear as a simple mathematical addition of terrains vagues. But the vague urbain has more to it: it holds a community, commerce, play, exchanges, practices; in short, it contains urban life. As described above, the case of Bachoura is anchored in this reality. While it has most services a "regular" neighborhood might have to offer, perhaps beside reliable running water or electricity, it is not that far away from being a neighborhood amongst others. One of the reasons why it is not that far away is that, unlike a slum or a makeshift settlement, it is organized and woven into the regular fabric of the city through its street network and its building stock. It is a direct continuation of the city's network and is inscribed in its history. Though its current community found refuge within its broken walls from even more desperate conditions, it settled a familiar culture within a known territory. A culture and territory that are cornered by recent development but that are not yet gone; a culture and territory that persist in the practice of the city.

Weaving the marvelous, the act of configuration, the vague, and architectural invention and representation as a theoretical structure, I have tried, through the words, photos, and drawings presented in this book, to provide an opportunity for creative proposals to emerge and for the neglected neighborhood and community to participate in our imagination of Beirut. The attentive observation, description, and transcription of Bachoura suggest that there can be ways to find the imagination of the city within what is already there and experienceable. What this theoretical structure and project attempt to do is to brush away the fear that the everyday is hopeless, fearful, or simply ordinary. Rather, it proposes that the configuring of Bachoura draws our attention to alternative practices instead of standardized positions as to what is worth our attention. I have sought to capture some of the details that build and give sense to the neighborhood, a creative documentation that presents for our view non-official stories while posing a sincere and conscientious attention to a place that seemed, *a priori*, useless and disposable.

Building on the intricacies of Bachoura and on the found, improvised, temporary, and illegal uses of the city's offerings, the photographic documentation, descriptions, architectural machines and drawings explore how a parallel Beirut can be found: where the remnants of abandoned buildings, overgrown lots, and improvised playgrounds act as marvelous devices for informal invention. This undertaking sought a way to infiltrate *bachourian* practices into the changing context. When Bachoura is devoured by the newer Beirut, perhaps the imagined infrastructures would allow for the bachourian marvelous real to stroll and glean the new landscape. Through the interpretation and telling of practices that are not otherwise represented or that are devalued by the current discourse, the work proposes that the vague urbain contains a marvelous real that is necessary for the well-being of the city and for escaping a one-way urbanization.

Because I am very much aware of my *non-lebaneseness*, let alone my *non-bachourianness*, it would be impossible to argue that my observations were always completely aware of all the intricacies at play, or that they weren't

tinted by my foreigner's eyes, or, again, that I wasn't given access to places, people, and situations precisely because I looked and sounded from elsewhere. This being said, the point was not to explain Bachoura in an anthropological manner, nor to investigate its political affiliations, but to find its practices and transcribe Bachoura. As says Klaske Havik, "the art of transcription lies in finding the 'essence' of the original version, and developing a second version that, however different, embodies the 'soul' of the first."[143] The idea is thus not to copy the original or to pretend to know everything about it like a carbon copy, but to capture details that embody essential aspects of what is observed in order "to add new qualities to the original,"[144] to give it value and possibilities. Using architectural methods of analysis and creativity, each element of the project allows for different readings and stories to emerge, challenges our preconceptions about Bachoura, and provokes an engagement with a place where we most likely didn't need to be.

The practice, as presented by de Certeau, of the marvelous real, as defended by Carpentier, implied in the present time, as described by Ricoeur, can only be generated through situational actions. In other words, it is through practice that one can grasp situations that are ever so slightly detached from the everyday continuum to reveal a specificity and a recognition that what might have seemed accidental in fact contains deeply rooted elements of what constitutes the everyday. Practice requires action and engagement with the everyday; it requires an acute eye and receptivity to details and differences, time spent walking aimlessly through all geographical variations, and the presence of mind to capture, transcribe, and transliterate these meaningful situations.

143. Havik, Klaske. 2014. *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture.* Rotterdam: NAi010 Publishers, 98.

144. Ibid.

In light of these references and of the argument I have tried to build with this book, the project combines a photographic documentation, as a witness to the condition of prefiguration; textual descriptions, lying somewhere between the acts of prefiguring and configuring; and two series of drawings that bridge from configuration to the beginnings of reconfiguration. Thus from the documentation and description of found places and situations, five nomadic and transitory personal infrastructures were elaborated. Each manifests three essential practices of Bachoura: those of narration, of wandering, and of gleaning—something de Certeau would more likely call poaching. The personal infrastructures are linked to the space from which they emerged; they wander the city to extend its narrative, safeguarding existing conditions while planting new seeds of occupation. They thus stem from found situations and events and become—as they belong to soon-to-disappear places, people, buildings, and practices—invented rooms without definite location, pushed, rolled, pulled, swung, or carried through the new city as nomadic, personal, terrains vagues.

Starting with a systematic documentation recording empty lots, uses of parking spaces, drying laundry, children at play or at work, men occupying sidewalks, green spaces, passages, and artistic interventions, and followed by photographic montages rendering movement in important locations, the photographic documentation is meant to evoke the affective dimension of Bachoura and capture its present—a present enfolding past and future.

While most practices found on the streets of Bachoura are repeated over time, the rhythm in which they appear isn't always clear; hence the necessity of going often, at various times of day, on various days. While such an exercise might appear somewhat normal, suspicion and

surveillance are very real in the neighborhood. Residents are often unhappy when cameras are pulled out. Some will just throw a disapproving look, while others will be very clear about not wanting photos to be taken. Often mistaken for a real estate developer's envoy, it is no wonder that the stranger with a camera is unwelcome.

All photos were taken with a point-and-shoot camera so that it could quickly be pulled out of a pocket and quickly put back, while settings had to remain general enough for any kind of situation. While it is common for architects to collage photos when wanting to have a full image of a site or a building, often much larger then what the lens allows one to take, the photomontages were done in a much more fluid manner, with the camera placed at a different angle for almost every shot in order to create a dynamism in the photography that simulates, to some extent, the dynamism implied in walking through the different sites. While the point-and-shoot camera doesn't always produce the desired image quality, it does, on the other hand, allow a very fluid and spontaneous movement of the hand that enriches the photomontage. It also allows for a large number of photos to be taken quickly—which is a not-insignificant quality when documenting a vague urbain—allowing one to produce, once combined, very large images.

Along with the desire to document Bachoura, I wanted to test how architectural drawing, with all its technicalities, could constitute a narrative tool, or a tool of spatial transcription of the visual documentation. From five of the many situations in which I found myself through the documentation process, the drawing of the personal infrastructures—or the rooms, to put it more simply—transcribe, in their own architectural language, the situational time, spaces, narratives, and practices of Bachoura. For instance, children playing hide and seek in an abandoned building located in the midst of an impromptu garden become *A room for hiding in the shadows of a room*, an infrastructure to carry shadows with you, no matter the time of day or night. In it, thousands of silky threads embody the shadow, so one may feel the warmth and softness shade provides in the depths of a hot afternoon. Men spending most of their day sitting on plastic chairs, smoking arguileh and drinking coffee, becomes *A room for keeping distractions away*, an infrastructure to keep one both in movement and in the same space. As one balances on the swing, a reversed gear rolls the machine in the opposite direction so that, though flying through space, one remains in the same location. Confusion about wanting to give unnecessary directions becomes *A room for going where you don't need to be*, an infrastructure that is so large and heavy, it is practically impossible to move up a street. Yet, the infrastructure's purpose is to carry a watchtower so that when lost or uncertain of where to go, one lifts it up and mounts the stairs so as to see further in the preferred direction. But by the time one climbs down the spiral, turns the infrastructure back on its side, and pushes it hard enough to make it go forward, directions are again lost and the infrastructure will lead the way toward where one most likely didn't need to go. An old woman proud of her one room apartment containing her complete life story becomes *A room for sharing essential things*, a half dome structure, as a woven basket one carries on one's back. When wandering about the city and encountering another carrier of essential things, both carriers can put their half dome down to form a complete structure in which essential things, words or practices can be shared. And finally, the incredible story of a Prime Minister who sends men to tear up sidewalks in order to use the stones for building a villa in the desert, becomes *A room for carrying stones*, an empty wall structure that is pushed around the city in order to collect stones and broken concrete. As

stones are collected, the infrastructure becomes heavier, eventually too heavy to be pushed further. Stones are then emptied to allow the structure to be pushed again, leaving behind a pile of traveled stones.

Even if these rooms seem improbable, their representation of found situations proposes the integration of the marvelous somewhere in the present, and embeds the marvelous within cultural traits, spatial specificities, everyday habits, and local history. That is why the infrastructures are presented in orthogonal projection: their drawing builds a dialogue between, on the one hand, the informality of a found and projected everyday, a personification of knowledge through which the body produces and stores a silent knowledge,[145] and, on the other, the neutral communication of architectural drawings. In this way, the drawings introduce the informality of the vague urbain, as a silent reality of our cities, into the scholarly discourses of architecture and the cities it builds. The strangeness of the infrastructures and situations from which they emerge are thus associated, through the architectural drawing, with disciplinary know-hows.

The second series of drawings places the rooms in a Beiruti context, as if they had been built and left to lead a life of their own. The landscapes are half-invented, in that they are drawn from strong images of Beirut but do not depict definitive and precise places. As such, and as with the room drawings, each landscape clearly belongs to the city even if one is in fact incapable of identifying a precise location. Represented like a façade, i.e. in two dimensions rather than in perspective, the landscapes are drawn using standard drawing techniques, as an architect would employ for an elevation. And like the elevation, which demonstrates how a given—imagined—building will act upon its surroundings and contribute to the developing context, so these landscapes, simultaneously real and invented, convey their ability to transform our outlook and steer our attention as we apprehend the cityscape. The landscapes translate essential situational qualities by configuring temporal and spatial heterogeneity, and begin a reconfiguration that includes the marvelous as a given in the city, a factor which acts upon our expectations of the foreseeable future.

In presenting the drawings in this book, I hope to resonate with the words of Alejo Carpentier when he says that "we must uncover and interpret [the world] ourselves. Our reality will appear new to our own eyes. Description is inescapable, and the description of a [strange] world is necessarily [strange], that is, the 'what' and the 'how' coincide in a strange reality."[146] The texts, photographs, rooms and landscapes describe, together, the strange yet ordinary present of Bachoura, its cultural memory and its apparently inevitable future. They are closer to being active devices than is a purely literary description, only because the tools of architecture are meant to translate thought into action upon the environment; each element of the work constitutes a piece of a narrative machine, one that links a vague urbain to the city, and the city to some of its found stories. Through this transcriptive gymnastics, it becomes possible to think of Beirut as a city where explorations questioning the relentless

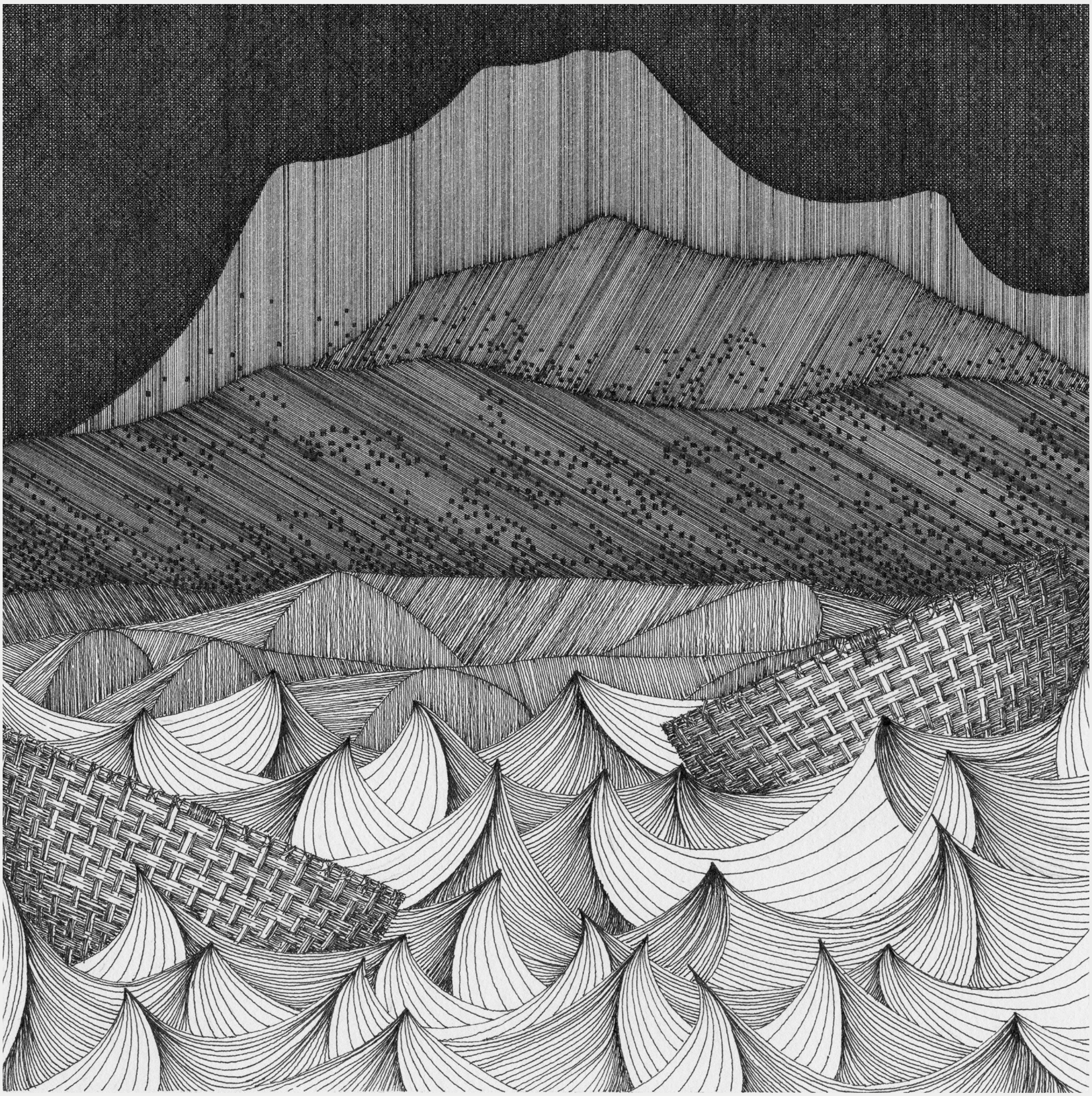
145. In his theory of emotions, Jean-Paul Sartre argued that our being in the world is first and foremost embodied. In other words, it is our physical experience of the world that acts as the foundation of our knowledge: *"La compréhension n'est pas une qualité venue du dehors à la réalité humaine, c'est sa manière propre d'exister."* Though this sensorial, physical knowledge does not get as much recognition as that of the intellect, it nonetheless represents a silent knowledge that allows us to comprehend the world we live in. Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1939. *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions. Paris: Hermann & Cie.*

146. Carpentier, "Baroque and the marvellous real", 106.

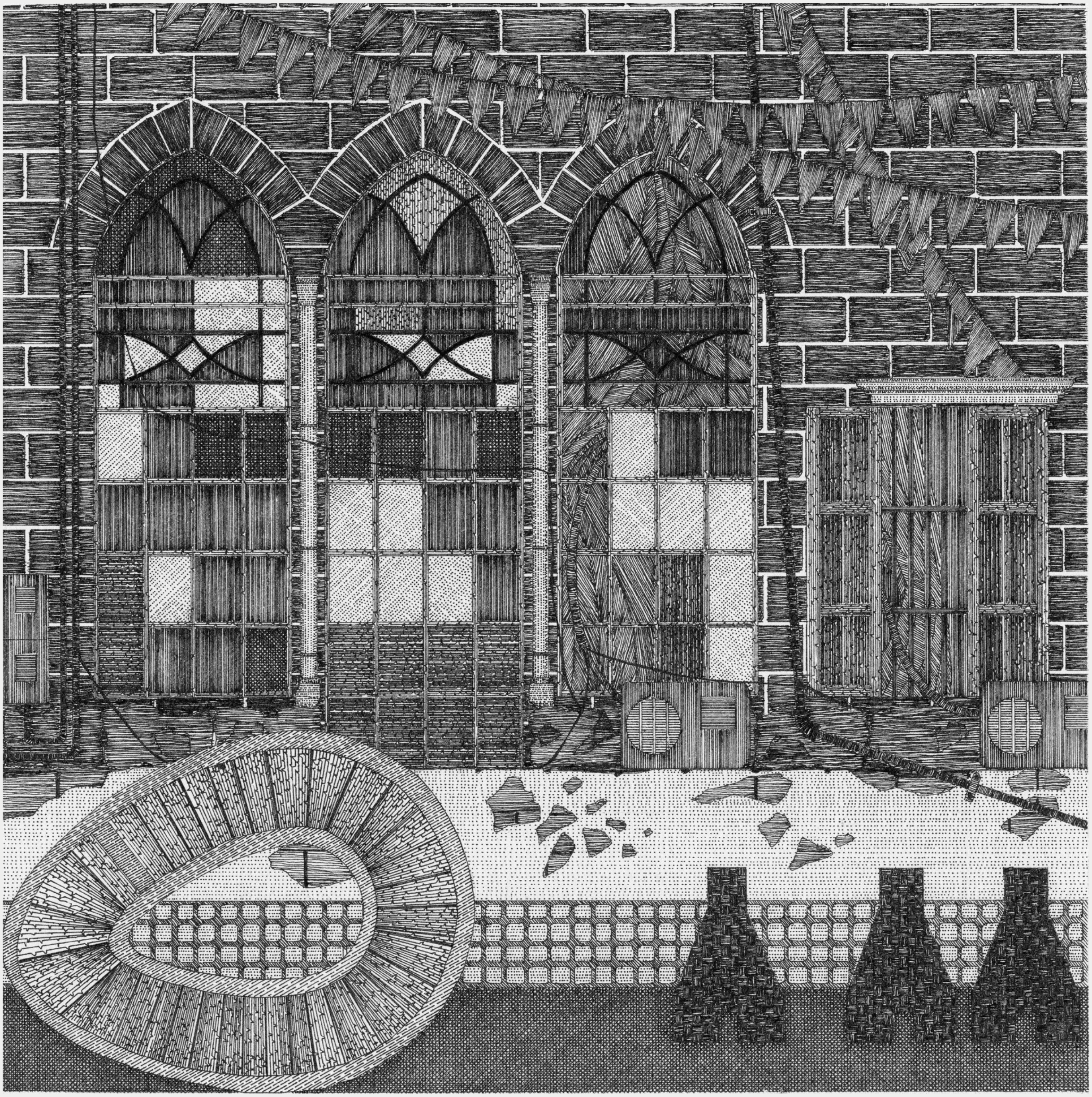
destruction of its found character can participate in both the imagination of other possible narratives and the unearthing of value in existing ones. It is my hope that an undertaking such as this one may, perhaps, make a small room for bachourian marvelousness in the changing context of Beirut.

following pages:
Carole Lévesque. *Landscapes*. 2012-2013

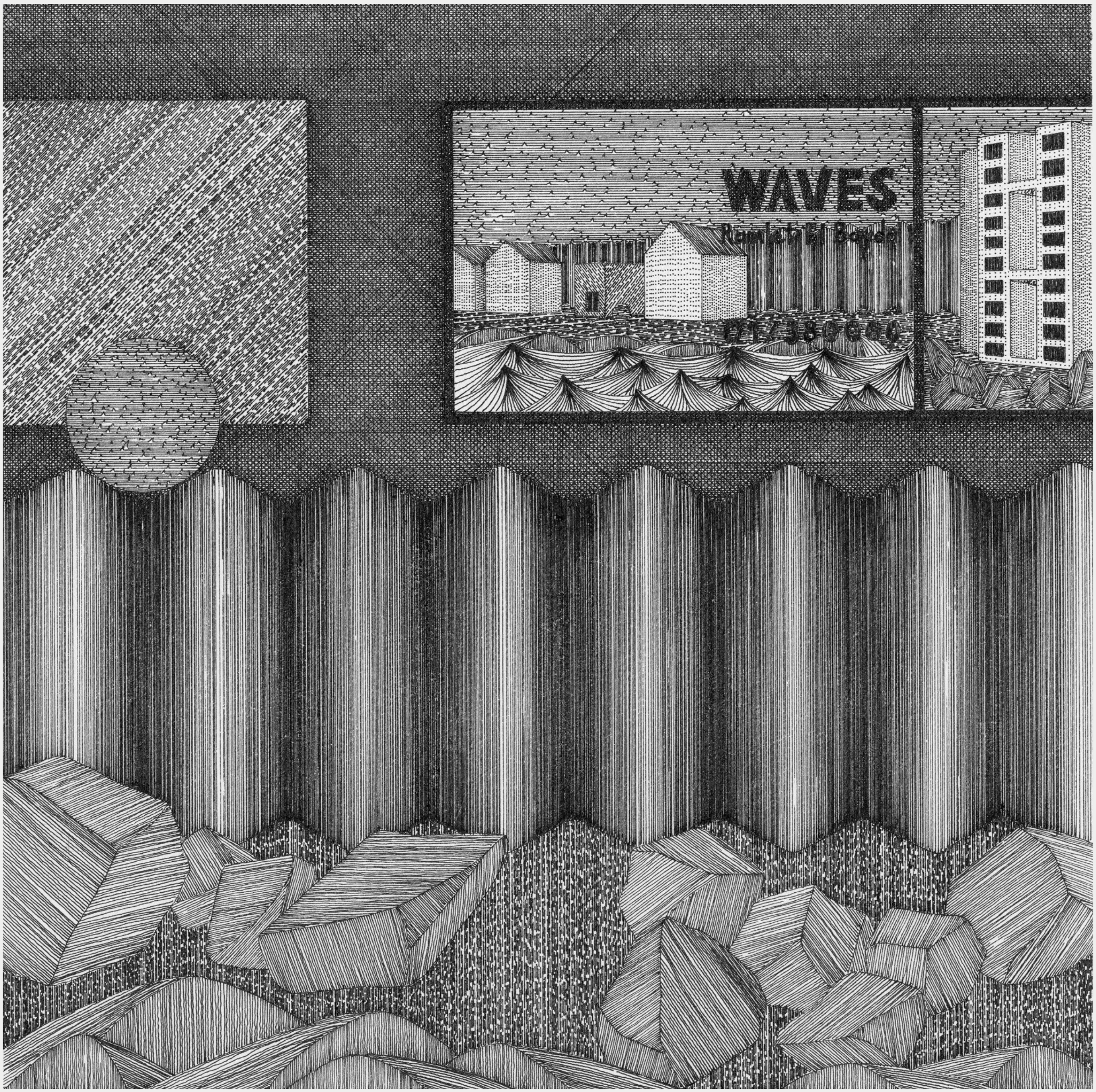
ink on paper 20 x 20 cm



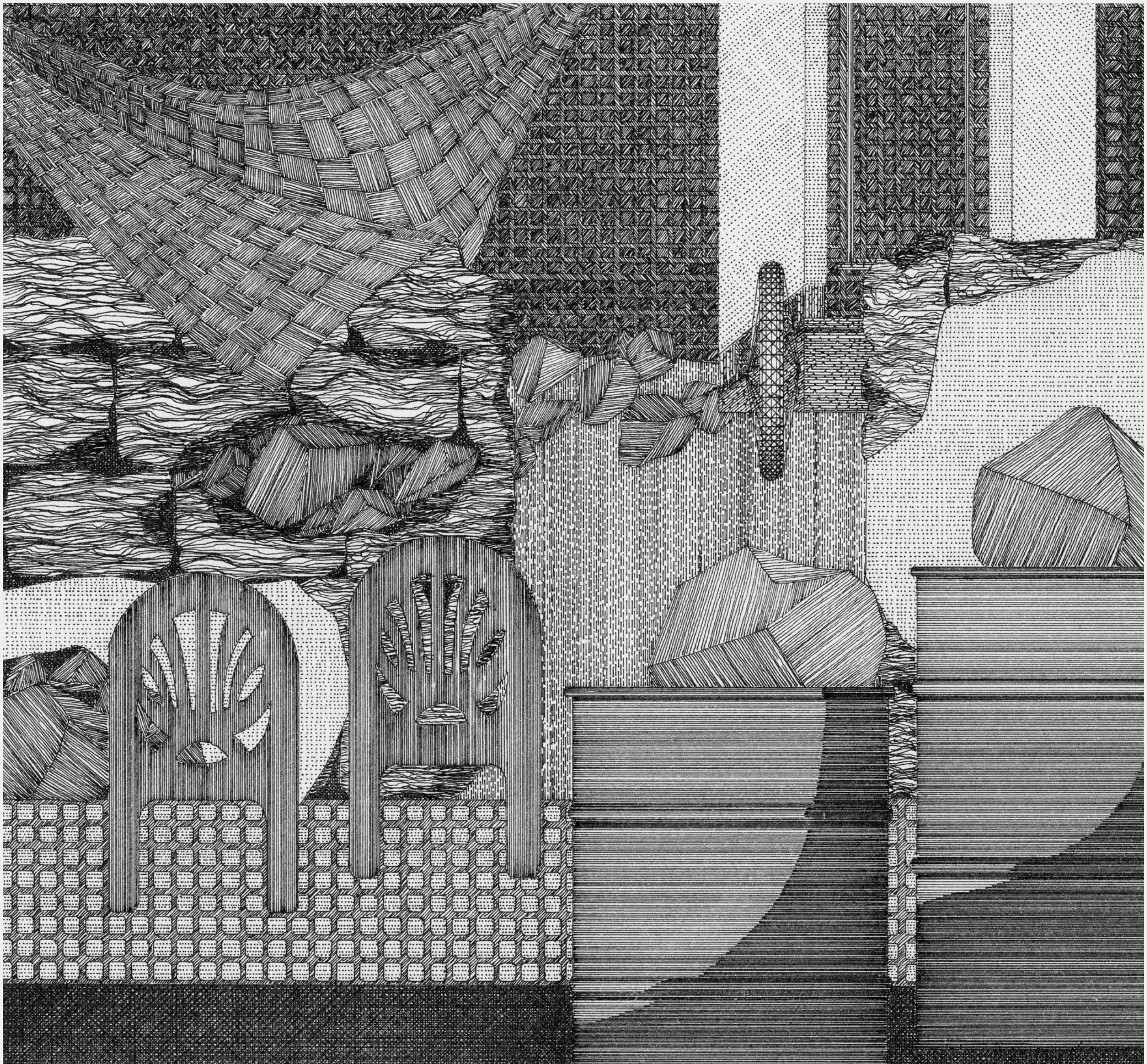
Arriving in Beirut



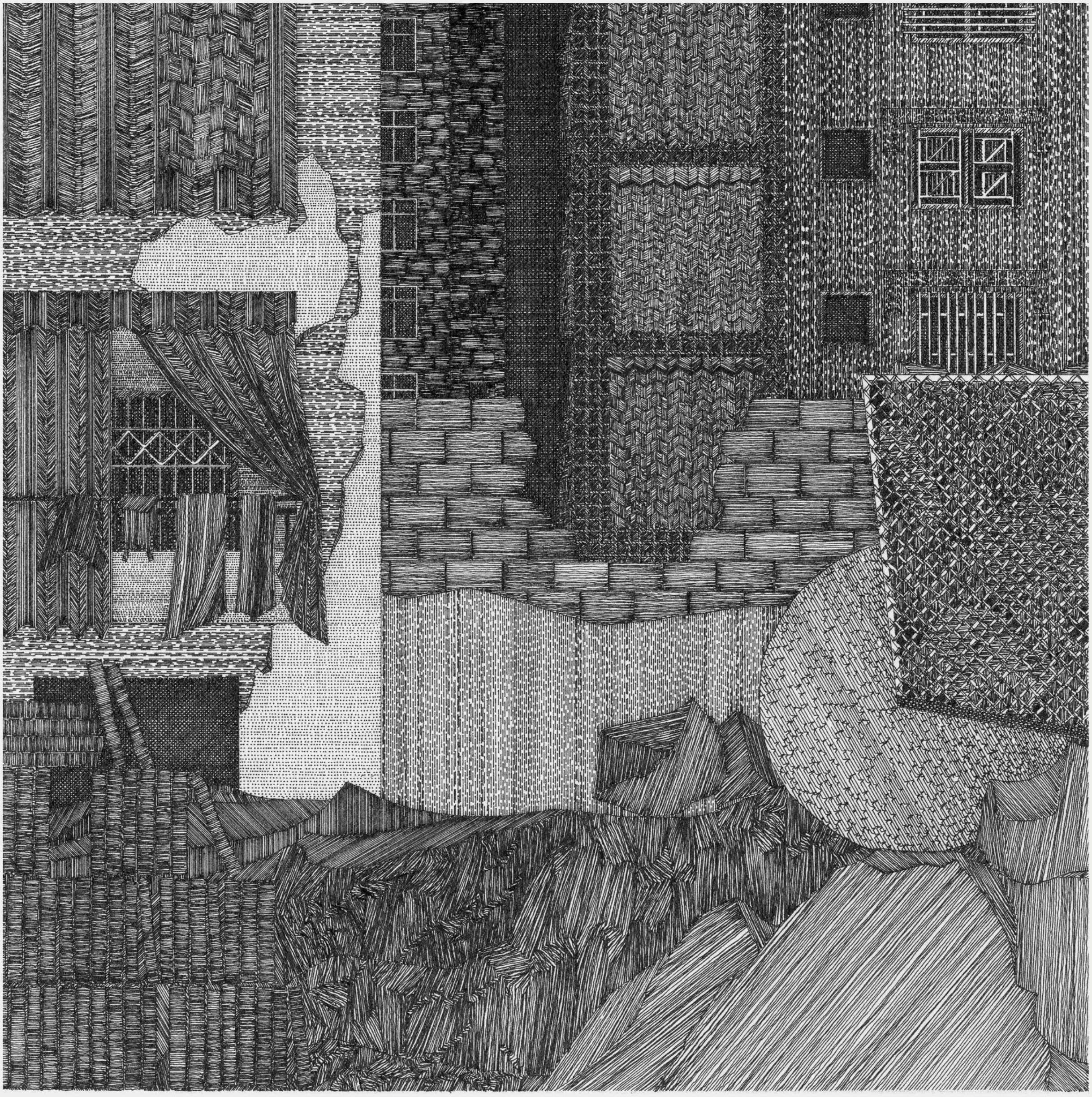
Visiting Beirut



Settling down in Beirut



Waiting in Beirut



Building Beirut

Enough room for the everyday

The act of walking, said Michel de Certeau, is to the urban system what speech is to language.[147] While language is an agreed-upon system of meaning, speech is what allows language to come alive through intonation, fluency, and articulation. In the same manner, walking is a space of enunciation[148]: it allows for an appropriation of the city's spaces with rhythm, diversion, and purpose. The connotation between speech and walking as means to play with and around the fixed and established order supposes that we all are aware of the systems (linguistic and urban) and that we all use them on a daily basis. This being said, while we all share the same systems, some of us, perhaps more aware than others, perhaps more willing than others, more inventive or simply more naïve or playful than others, choose to divert the rules, to bend and push further what they initially might seem to allow. When thinking about the playfulness of language, great figures of literature, poetry or actors breathing life into texts come to mind as obvious examples of what can be achieved when digressing from the initial system. When thinking about the urban, bending the rules may imply illegality or exclusion—each potentially bearing significant consequences—but it may also imply a more subtle appropriation of the city. The simple act of walking, aimlessly or with a purpose, but without a clear and final destination or a need to be somewhere, is a practice of its own, one that reveals topographical and cultural variations, possibilities for action, unsuspected corners and uses of the city. The practice of walking, a practice that is genuine and frequent, is what allows us to draw connections between places and people, between times and habits, so that alternative narratives of the city may be woven in and around, through and with the urban system in place. While de Certeau opposed the view of the city seen from above—the view of planners, urban designers, architects, and developers—to the view seen from within—the view of the dweller and of the practitioner—walking appears as a hybrid possibility, a view that is informed by the all-encompassing yet fully immersed in everyday trajectories. Walking is a practice which, while in full awareness of the grand discourse, still seeks for the relevant details that make the city what it really is. The act of walking is a manifesto for intentional deviation, enacting a terrain of continuous negotiation.

The same could be said about the vague: though immobile per se, the vague is always in movement, wandering across the city as it is driven away from one area by urban development, to reappear just a little bit further along. Despite the efforts of planning and urban renewal, the vague inevitably reemerges in the vicinity of newer fabrics and, with it, undesired and unfit practices. A certain form of nomadism thus shares the city with what is perceived as fixed and sedentary; these form a dynamic equilibrium, that is to say an equilibrium that has to negotiate its terms anew every time a vague is taken away and forced to reinvent itself in

147. Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien,* 148.

148. Ibid.

the process of its reappearance.

Though the vague urbain shares very similar characteristics, its time and mobility are slightly different. Indeed, while it is only temporary, its scale and endurance permit an impression of durability in its parallel coexistence with the formal city. Because it has time to develop and hold an active life of its own, the vague urbain is a demonstration that the non-ideal city can coexist and thrive within the determined and help maintain the delicate balance between the city of the conqueror and that of the dweller. Growing out of the remains left by the planned city, it offers a landscape whose value can only be recognized by the practitioner, be that its inhabitant or a devoted walker. Walking the vague urbain, becoming acquainted with its subtleties, drawing links between its denigrated practices and similar ones scattered across other neighborhoods, grasping the details that inhabit its narratives, and devoting time to transcribe the findings of such walks, is more than a *flâneur*'s wandering: it is an active and engaged practice that seeks to transform our perceptions from a dismissive glance to an involved eye. It is a practice that seeks to include uncertainty, resilience, contingency, and the likes, within the unattainable desire for fixity.

In search for an archeology of the line, Tim Ingold states that: "for the inhabitant, the line of his walk is a way of knowing. Likewise the way of writing is, for him, a way of remembering. In both cases, knowledge is integrated 'along' a path of movement."[149] Because they both require a strong acquaintance with and keen observation of place, the movements of body and language are thus two active methods to build knowledge about place. Very much like the construction of a story as the storyline develops, walking finds its way along the walk; it is only when it comes to a stop that the walker can claim to have found his route. Similarly, writing about the specificities of a given place or situation in the hope of a precise remembrance requires the writer to be inscribed in place, that is, to have spent enough time walking to trace a similar path with words.

Drawing is certainly a third active method for forming knowledge about place. As the path of the walk draws itself while walking, and as images arise as words flow from speech (whether spoken or written), drawing happens as one draws. As the drawing appears on the page, details gather, accidents occur, and it falls back onto the ability of the drawer to find his or her way through the drawing to tell the story of the place he or she set out to draw. Drawing narratively requires an acute observation of what is to be drawn: built forms, shadows, passers-by, the time of day, smells, sounds, distances, memories, encounters, and other stories told. As one can walk without truly walking, as one can talk without truly speaking, one can draw very precisely yet without truly drawing. The practice of drawing that is linked to true walking and writing is one where the path of the hand can be followed and where the presence of place can be felt. While the hand will sometimes take the initiative, as Juhani Pallasmaa suggested in *The Thinking Hand*,[150] narrative drawings can only be shaped after the knowledge of place has been embodied through repetitive drawing, or after repeated encounters with the narratives to be drawn. More than a mere representation, the narrative drawing allows the eye to wander and walk through the story being told.

While the story may vary depending on the hand of the drawer and the transcription he or she may choose to project unto the page, the narrative drawing of the architect necessarily projects itself into the future: this is what we

149. Ingold, Tim. *Lines: A Brief History*. New York: Routeledge, 91.

150. Pallasmaa, Juhani. 2009. *The Thinking Hand*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.

are trained to do and possibly what we do best. Drawing, for an architect, is either to draw with close attention the existing as a way of learning from what others have done so that lessons can be transferred to later projects; or it is to draw an imagined construction, whether for a precise assignment or to satisfy the constructive imagination. In either case, the imaginative landscape of the architect is oriented toward the future. But according to Ingold, to imagine a landscape is to bring forth a present that is ever-emergent as the future's past.[151] So while one's drawing may be conceived for a time to come in the future, it really pertains to the present. The drawing does not depict the future of the city per se but is rather an act of comprehension and of action unto the present: from what the present was, to what it is and to what it will become. Telling a story through drawing thus makes complete sense: the narrative drawing crystalizes the present, which implicates both the understanding of place (thus of the past) and a telling of the present, and "opens up paths in and through the world"[152]—thus toward futures. The narrative drawing is an act of configuration that lets the eye roam through the lines, telling stories, as technical as they may sound, "rather than fixing end-points in advance."[153]

As in the promise of the everyday self-storification supposed by Charles Jencks in the unselfconscious tradition, the disclosure of potential appropriation of unclaimed urban space imagined in the temporary constructions of the late work of Cedric Price, or in the constructive details of Melvin Charney which fragment architecture to reveal past, present, and future memories, temporalities are embedded in the experience we make of the city. While it all might appear as a continuous sequence of events, each encounter is really temporary, as an experience always occurs to form the bed for something else to become. Because present experiences belong both to past and future, it seems fundamental to pay close attention to what the everyday has to reveal; small differences, hopefully marvelous, may very well bear significance for how we perceive our environment and shape our desires for it. As Jean-François Lyotard said:

> There are many events whose occurrences don't offer any matter to be confronted, many happenings inside of which nothingness remains hidden and imperceptible, events without barricades. They come to us concealed under the appearance of everyday occurrences. To become sensitive to their quality as actual events, to become competent in listening to their sound underneath silence or noise, to become open to the "It happens that" rather than to the "What happens," requires at the very least a high degree of refinement in the perception of small differences.[154]

Needless to say, the degree of refinement Lyotard speaks of comes with practice, and only through an active practice does it acquire sufficient meaning to influence how we may be willing to reconsider our desires for the city. Paying close attention to the present everyday in all of its details supposes that we may be willing to act within and upon the city without predetermined expectations, to look where we are going without projecting a precise ideal, or to make room for other ideals to join.

I began writing this book wondering how the meeting of the everyday, the vague, and temporary architecture could influence or build a new narrative for areas about to

151. Ingold, Tim. 2012. "Introduction." In *Imagining Landscape, Past, Present and Future,* edited by Monica Janowski and Tim Ingold. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 10.

152. Ibid.

153. Ibid.

154. Lyotard, Jean-François. 1988. *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event.* New York: Columbia University Press, 41.

undergo transformation. I wanted to get my head around how an entire neighborhood could be in the middle of a city without participating in it or, perhaps more fairly, how it is kept out of participation. While these inquiries led me on a few detours, I hope to have shown the capacity of the everyday, the vague, and the temporary to produce narratives that can help us reflect on what it means to inhabit the city in its present time. Because neighborhoods such as Bachoura stand outside the agreed-upon ideal, they allow us to wonder about current circumstances; they enable practitioners of the city to underscore the possibility that other narratives might coexist. The vague urbain is a temporary condition, a movement really, a collection of actions within and upon the city. While it may appear out of place, anomalous and detached, it performs with a hidden punctuality and diffuse precision that sustain its presence. In reality, the vague urbain is an involved commitment to the informal, to a marvelously nomadic narrative whose path leads us to think that we might still find, hidden somewhere in the city, enough room for the everyday.

Saint George church







Bachoura, April 22, 2018

For many years the elevated section of the Fouad-Chehab highway served as the limit—or the gate, according to how we look at things—of Bachoura. This view, taken south of the highway and approximately a third of the way into Bachoura, bears witness to the incremental disapearance of the neighborhood: the days of its built form, its practices, and its community, are definitely numbered. By the summer of 2019, two towers, one on either side of the Saint George church, will both reach a good 20 stories, continuing the expansion of the Beirut Digital District all the while shrinking the space and capacity left for the vague urbain to resist.

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Finding Room in Beirut. Places of the Everyday demonstrates why it is worth our while to explore the value and contemporary meaning of urban areas about to undergo complete renewal. Branching off from discourses surrounding the *terrain vague*, the book argues that large populated urban areas meet the criteria of the vague and constitute a particular perspective from which to build a critical stance in regards to the contemporary city. But unlike a terrain vague, a *vague urbain*—an inhabited area where property ownership is usually obscure and informal behaviours a daily affair—possesses real communities and offers an alternative understanding on how a city can be practiced and how lessons should be learned before its complete transformation. Stemming from a photographic and architectural documentation of Bachoura, a central area of Beirut, Lebanon, the book shows how the vague urbain allows for different ways of inhabiting, ways that are as—or perhaps even more—real and anchored in the imagination of the city as those proposed by standardising developments. Building on the intricacies of found situations, improvised uses and local narratives, it is an exploration as to how the meeting of a marvellous realism with the intrigue, the vague urbain and temporary architecture can provide opportunities for the emergence of hidden narratives.

"The emerging literature on postwar informality in the Arab world mostly pertains to peripheral slums, refugee camps and decaying postcolonial infrastructural sites. Carole Lévesque's highly original text shifts our perspective towards the peri-center districts in a state of transiency to redefine the meaning of terrain vague inside the city and invest it with architectural interventions to probe the unique nature and inner logic of a dualistic city like Beirut. Only an outsider/insider and empathetic gaze such as hers can enrich our local vision of the ordinary with the marvelous real, adding a unique and imaginative dimension to architectural studies of postwar cities at the global and regional levels."

Robert Saliba, Professor of architecture and urbanism at the American University of Beirut and editor of *Urban Design in the Arab World, Reconceptualizing Boundaries.*

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